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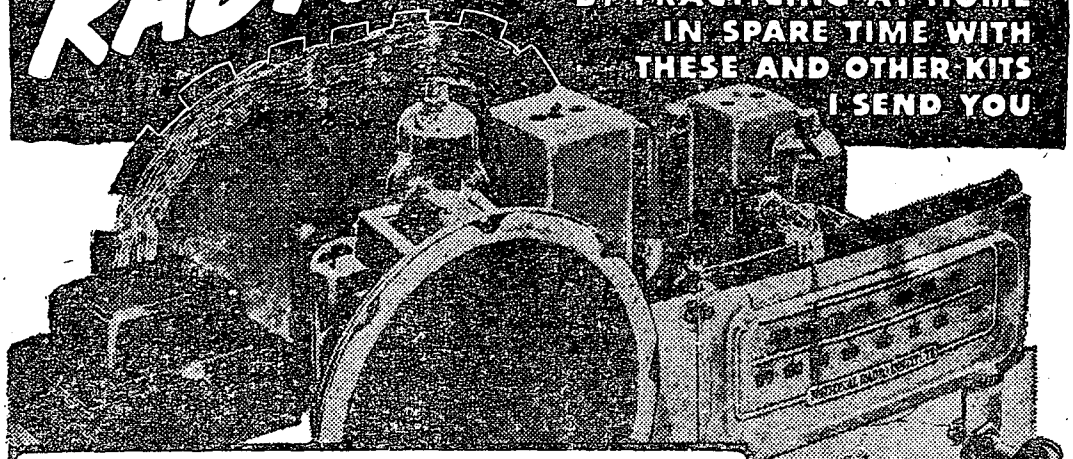

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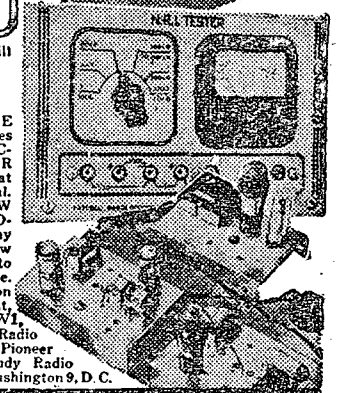

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

A COUPLE of months ago we presented our views in this department on the current status of the book field in relation to science-fiction and fantasy. We've received quite a bit of response to that editorial, and are more than gratified to report here that the general consensus of opinion is much as our own—from writer to publisher.

REPRESENTATIVE OF the writer's viewpoint on the subject is a letter we have on our desk from Robert W. Krepps (author of *The Field of Night, and The Courts of the Lion*, published by Rinehart, and whose famous penname, Geoff St. Reynard, has come to mean tops in your favorite magazine), stating: "I'd like to congratulate you on your editorial in the February issue of FA. There were a number of things to be said about the situation and you said them forcefully. We professional writers owe you a debt of gratitude. I'll be in New York next month seeing my publishers, and at that time I intend to talk to a few people about it—now that the die has been cast!"

FROM THE publisher's side, Melvin Korshak, of Shasta Publishers, prominent in the science-fantasy book field, dropped into our office to present his views. He had this to say: "I agree with what you had to say on the matter, my only main point of difference being that you may have stated the situation in a rather strong light. It is all too true that the bulk of books being published in the stf field are reprints, and that there is a danger extant of alienating readers by scraping the bottom of the barrel for future works. However, I do feel that the publisher has been justified in starting his line with reprints inasmuch as well-known stories by well-known writers have done much to create interest for this new audience."

WE THEN asked Mr. Korshak what his views as a publisher were for the immediate future. He replied: "There is no question but that the day of the reprint must end. This is especially true of the specialist houses such as *Shasta*, who must compete with the larger publishers who are entering the field on a large scale. Along these lines we have scheduled two originals for early publication, and would like to state that we are more than willing to discover new writers with unpublished book-length manuscripts. We intend to do this, and feel fairly confident that other publishers will, if they have not already done so, adopt this policy. Your frank discussion of the subject in FA should be closely read by all members in the trade."

ALL YOUR editors have to add is that we are pleased with the response to our editorial, and that it is gratifying to know that steps are being taken to produce fine original works for readers of the genre.

WE HEARD from one of your old favorites the other day. Charles F. Myers, author of the famous *Toffee* series in FA not only wrote us (after a considerable and annoying silence) but accompanied his letter with a novel-length *Toffee* story. Naturally we sat down and read it without further ado. And we'd like to state right here and now that it is the best thing Charles Myers has written yet. We've gone on record before stating that we feel that Myers has proven himself worthy of wearing the mantle of the late and cherished master of cynical fantasy humor, Thorne Smith. We'd like to add only one detail to that viewpoint. After reading Myers' new novel, (which you'll have the pleasure of reading yourself in the big June issue) we feel that the author is well on the road to establishing *himself* as a master of this type of prose.

WE HAD lunch the other day with Fritz Leiber, Jr. Fritz, as you know, has written some of the top novels and short stories in the science-fantasy field. (Don't miss his "Let Freedom Ring!" in the April issue of *Amazing Stories*.) Fritz outlined an idea he had for a long fantasy. To let you know how much we liked it, all we can say is our food grew cold on the plate. Needless to say, Fritz is working on the story now, and he promises it for an early issue of FA. It's something to look forward to.

ROG PHILLIPS dropped in with a big smile on his face, to announce that his second pocket book will be brought out shortly. We congratulated Rog, and feel proud of the fact that our writers are proving their worth in other channels, and also helping to promote science-fantasy fiction before the American reading public. All this adds up to the fact that FA is bringing you the best, and will continue to do so. Until next month.....WLH

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A woman's voice, soft and seductive, came to him across the void. Was her plea for help legitimate or some horrible trap?

By Franklin Bahl

The FACE BEYOND the VEIL

THE SILENT hiss was the airlock door sliding open. Zaney Smith was already lawing at the helmet of his spacesuit.

It came loose, revealing his feverishly bright blue eyes under bushy gray eyebrows, and his two weeks growth of unkept beard.

The rest of his suit came off. It and the helmet, in spite of the obvious haste with which Zaney moved, were laid very carefully in their proper places in the spacesuit locker. Zaney hadn't survived this long in his forty years of travelling the interplanetary lanes by forgetting or neglecting such essential precautions.

He sat down in the pilot seat. His hands reached for the controls, hesitated. He got up and went over to the *orienter*. Standard equipment on all spaceships, the *orienter* was a robot device with tracking photocells permanently fixed on the Sun, Polaris, and Sirius. Every ten minutes it typed out the position and orbit of the ship in relation to the rest of the Solar System. This data went onto a roll of paper for a permanent record. The figures showed through a glass rectangle at the base of the *orienter*.

Zaney took paper and pencil from a small drawer and copied them down. He put the scrap of paper in his worn billfold. After that he chewed the end of the pencil thoughtfully. His eyes surveyed the room, slowly.

He went over to the airlock and got down on his knees. With the pencil he wrote the data on his present orbit on the dirty paint of the metal wall, a few inches up from the floor.

A minute later the pilotseat was cushioning his body against the acceleration of the rocket blast that

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Her figure was framed in all its beauty as she stood there, like some ethereal goddess . . .

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sent him in a long arc away from the corroded, giant huld his little ship had been nestled against.

"Damme for a zaney prospector," Zaney said to himself. "All my life I've steered clear of females since—"

His thoughts shied away from the experience, years before, that had turned him into a woman-fearer.

He centered the ship's sights on Mars and threw in the robot pilot. A small rectangle lit up on the control panel after a moment. The numbers, 243, glowed at him.

"Two hundred and forty-three hours to Mars," he muttered. "Damme for a zaney prospector, but I don't like this. Why couldn't someone else have been here when she called for help. Now I gotta give up my plans for looking for Mobey Dick, and I bet I would've found him this time." *

"SHUT UP," Rek Barker said, glaring at Nels, his first mate. He turned back to the radar screen and watched its blank surface, waiting for something to show.

"But I'm tellin' you, Rek," Nels went on. "That voice wouldn't have stopped until we got there, unless someone got there first."

"I think different," Rek said without turning around. "I think she must have passed out. Anyway, what's the difference? If some prospector happened to get there first we could keep him from spilling his guts. We've done it before."

"Sure," Nels said. "But maybe he'll report it before we get a chance to."

"Did you ever see a prospector with a radio strong enough to reach from here to Mars or Earth?" Rek sneered. "Even our broadcaster won't reach that far. Twenty million miles to Mars right now, and it's closest. Wait! What's that?"

A speck had appeared on the radar screen. In order for it to even show, it would have to be less than half a million miles away.

Rek and Nels watched. After a while the speck developed a tail that showed, shadowlike, on the screen.

"A ship," Rek and Nels murmured together.

Rek set the ship's sights on it and switched in the autopilot to intercept it. In a moment numbers lit up in a small rectangle of glass on the control panel. They said 3:45.

"We'll reach him in three hours and forty-five minutes," Rek said unnecessarily. "Tell the boys to be ready."

Nels left the pilot room.

THREE HOURS and forty-five minutes later Rek Barker's ship was directly behind Zaney Smith's and just enough to one side to be out of the rocket stream.

Rek pressed a button on the control panel. A dull boom sounded through the ship as a round, thick plate trailing a metal cable shot out. It crossed the space separating the two ships and landed against the hull of Zaney's small craft with enough force to cause it to veer off its course.

Rek pulled a microphone from a clamp receptacle on the board and spoke into it. The microphone would pick up his voice and send it through

Mobey Dick is a legendary asteroid reputed to have been found by an asteroid prospector in 2017 A.D.. Two hundred feet long and twenty feet thick, spectro-photographs supposedly showed it to be pure diamond. Its finder, Gabby Fried, died without being able to find it again. Since that time it has been the dream of all space prospectors. The most conservative estimate of its value if found and brought intact to Earth or Mars, is B26. ($26,000,000.00) Gabby Fried called his find Mobey Dick because of its similarity in size, color, and shape, to the legendary whale of that name.

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the electro-magnet grapple, reproducing his voice as a vibration in the hull of Zaney's ship.

"Prepare to be boarded," Rek said. "If you resist you will be killed. This is Rek Barker talking."

He pushed the microphone back into its clamp with a malicious smile on his cruel lips. Those words he had just spoken had been the prelude to numberless boardings of innocent victims, during the ten years he had roamed the spaceways as a pirate. Not once had any of those who had let him board them to save their lives escaped to tell about it. In Rek's mind there was no doubt of what would happen this time, either.

The connecting cable grew taut. Then the rocket stream from the other ship died out.

"Think he'll destroy the orbit data on that visitor?" Nels asked.

"He's human," Rek said dryly. "He won't without memorizing it or making some sort of record. We'll torture it out of him."

"Why not offer to cut him in?" Nels asked.

"Cut him in?" Rek echoed incredulously. "Why should we? And anyway, this is too big to cut anybody in. Remember what she said? The ones who rescue her from her prison will be given enough power to run this little solar system! She's from some star system where their science is millions of years ahead of ours."

"Yeah," Nels said uneasily. "But—"

"But you think she can read minds," Rek jeered. "Just because her voice was mental instead of by radio. What if she can? Once we get our hands on her prison ship and take it to our hideout she's stuck until she accepts our terms. We'll give her time to think it over. Even without her we can probably find out enough about the stuff on board that ship to lay down our own law. There's probably weapons on it we never dreamed of. Take over the controls. I want to supervise this boarding personally. Some dumb cluck might gum things up."

"DO YOU suppose it could have been a gag of some sort?" Bill Hanes thought aloud.

"How?" Dave Armet asked. "We both heard exactly the same thing. We compared. It was mental, telepathic. Who has the science or the ability to broadcast thought—especially out here beyond the orbit of Mars?"

"But she said she'd keep calling until we reached her," Bill Hanes complained.

"Until *somebody* reached her," Dave Armet corrected. "Obviously somebody did."

"Well," Bill said. "I'm for giving up and going on as we were. We don't stand a chance of finding her now."

"Not yet," Dave said. "There's a strong chance that whoever reached her was a space prospector the same as we are. He'd need help. He might go out looking for it, or ask her to send out another call. Let's wait two or three more days."

As they talked, Dave's and Bill's eyes constantly went to the radar screen. Each time a new dot appeared on that screen they trained their visual telescope on it to examine it. Each time, since that telepathic call had sounded in their minds and then stopped, every new dot had proved to be merely a wandering chunk of iron or stone.

Now, as they watched, another appeared. Dave got up and went to the telescope eyepiece, pressing control buttons that ran the small motors directing the telescope, until the new object was visible.

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"It's a ship." There was relief in his voice. Bill Hanes took his place and looked.

"Yeah," he said. "But just the wreck of a prospecting ship. A small one at that. Look how she spins. If there was anyone on board they wouldn't let it spin end to end that way."

"We'd better investigate," Dave said. "Could be there's someone alive on board. Or maybe its owner died, and the ship itself's O.K.. We could take it to Mars and sell it."

FIVE HOURS later Dave fired the grapple plate. It shot out lazily across the space between the two ships. When it grabbed onto the slowly spinning ship, its connecting cable whipped, giving Dave a busy five minutes as he made both ships stable and brought them together gently.

The two men already had their spacesuits on. Now they stepped into the airlock, and were quickly outside the ship, the mildly magnetic soles of their suit shoes holding them down as they walked along the shell, leaped to the other ship, and entered its airlock.

"Must be nobody here," Bill said through the two way suit radio. "The airlock is open on the outside. That means the last time it was used someone went out instead of in."

Dave didn't answer. The two men waited quietly while the shell door closed and air entered the lock. As soon as the gauges showed pressure equalization he pressed the stud that opened the inner door.

The ship was dirty. Whoever had lived in it hadn't been too orderly. The ownership plate over the control panel said that it belonged to Zaney Smith.

"Zaney Smith!" Dave exclaimed. "Remember him? Last time we saw him was two years ago in Melba's on Mars. He was drunk as a lord on the money from a ten pound gold-bearing chunk he'd found out here."

"Wonder what happened to him," Bill said.

The two men explored the ship from the fuel compartments to the ore holds. No one was on board.

"Must have got lost from his ship out here," Bill finally decided. "Too bad, but he'd overlived his life expectancy long ago. Something was certain to happen to him."

"I don't know," Dave said slowly, his eyes on something on the wall near the floor to the right of the airlock door. He went over and stooped down. It was writing, scribbled in an almost illegible hand.

"Look at this!" he said sharply.

Bill joined him. The two men read:

"Rek Barker got me. Her orbit is—" And the orbit figures were written below this. Also the time.

"Zaney Smith must have been the one that got to her," Bill said, straightening up.

Dave rose and went to the small drawer under the orienter, returning with pencil and paper. He wrote down the orbit data.

"Rek Baker would get this out of Zaney," he said bitterly. "I've heard of him. He's not very well known because no one who meets him lives to talk about it. Remember last year when they arrested that guy who bragged he was one of Rek Barker's men, and how much loot they'd stored up on some out-of-the-way planetoid?" Bill nodded. "Somebody shot the guy before they could get him to jail," Dave went on.

"What do we do?" Bill asked. "Run to Mars and tell the space patrol what happened?"

"We've got two ships now," Dave said thoughtfully.

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"Wait a minute," Bill protested. "If you're thinking of sending me to Mars while you go after Rek Barker, think again. I won't do it."

"Be sensible," Dave said. "This thing's big. We can't run the risk of both of us getting killed. And one of us's got to go after Rek Barker while his exhaust trail is still readable."

"Then you go to Mars and let me try to follow him," Bill said.

"Yeah?" Dave said, smiling. "What was our agreement? In times of emergency I'm the boss. Remember?"

Bill grinned sourly.

"O.K., you're the boss," he said.

"O.K., then," Dave said. "I'll take our ship. This one's good enough to get to Mars in. Ours has a longer range broadcaster. The S.P.'s can probably pick up my location from a couple of million miles away." His expression softened. "Don't take it too hard, Bill. We ought to get enough out of this to retire on—if Rek Barker doesn't kill me and get away with everything."

He held out his gloved hand. Bill took it. They shook solemnly. Then Dave went to the airlock. Five minutes later his voice vibrated through the ship from the magnetic grapple plate.

"Get a move on, Bill," it said. "And I'll be seeing you—I hope."

"Sooner than you think," Bill said aloud to himself.

He went over to the writing on the wall and memorized the orbit data Zaney had written there. At the control panel he fed that data into the robot pilot; but ran the ship by manual control until he was out of radar range of the other ship.

He would reach the predicted position of the mystery ship-prison of the owner of that mental voice they had heard a few hours later than Dave because of his having to head toward Mars first; but he had no intention of missing the excitement.

"Anyway," he soothed his conscience. "If we get the S.P.'s in on this we only get ten percent of whatever comes from it. Why shouldn't we get our ten percent clear—after income taxes."

REK BARKER was in the pilot seat, his eyes half closed. He chuckled. Zaney Smith, the crazy old prospector, had been comical in his defiance.

Zaney had torn off the section of the orienter ribbon that had the orbit data for the mystery ship, and swallowed it. It had been a mistake. When Rek had pointed out to him that the paper was indigestible and the inks permanent, and all they would have to do would be to cut him open to get the paper, Zaney had wilted, his Adam's Apple jumping up and down on his scrawny neck, his inch-long beard quivering in terror.

Zaney had blurted out the data. He'd memorized it, as Rek knew he would.

Nels had been for killing the old prospecter of course. But Rek had decided to keep him alive until they got the prison ship. No telling what that female prisoner might have told him that would come in handy. So he'd ordered Zaney locked up for the present.

Now the ship was speeding to intercept the mystery ship. It was running on autopilot. The glass rectangle showed the numbers, 003; three hours yet.

There were several specks on the radar screen. Rek had examined each as it first appeared, and found them all to be plain chunks of rock. Now a new dot emerged in the center of the screen.

Rek went over and trained the

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telescope on it. It was the ship!

He studied it.

It was disappointingly small. Larger than his own craft, but much smaller than a space liner. Its shell, seen through the G and Q filters in the telescope, showed pitting and corrosion. Rek ran a spectro analysis on it. It was durosteel. That meant it must be plenty old, to be so pitted.

Its shape was different than that of any ship Rek had ever seen. It lacked the needle nose necessary for supersonic velocities in the atmosphere of a planet, and instead of a heavy rocket-stern for power acceleration, it merely had small control rockets.

"It must have anti-grav!" Rek said aloud. "That secret alone would give me control over all space travel."

The mystery ship was close enough now so that its details showed on the radar screen itself. Rek went to the control board and rang the alarm bell, waking his crew.

The automatic pilot was bringing his ship close to the other in a speed-matching maneuver. Rek prepared to fire the electromagnet grapple that would tie the two ships.

As Nels, stretching sleepily, came into the room from the sleeping quarters, Rek pressed the firing stud. The grapple plate drifted across to the other ship and landed with a thud.

Rek picked the microphone from its clamps on the control board. He winked at Nels. His voice was ingratiating as he spoke.

"This is Rek Barker, lady," he said. "Zaney Smith, the man who was here before, brought me and my men here to rescue you."

"Welcome aboard the Astrazomb," the melodious voice formed in his mind.

Rek and Nels grinned mirthlessly at each other, as only men can grin who have killed so many times the life of others has no value.

BEA-ANNA, in her prison aboard the Astrazomb, smiled slowly as she read the thoughts of Rek and Nels. She had plumbed the depths of their minds and knew what they were.

She knew what they did not—that telepathy works two ways or it doesn't work at all. When she had set out her call (as she had done periodically for the past ten million years in her driftings through space), five minds had sprung into her consciousness. There had been more, but she had immediately sensed that some were mere menials, subservient to the wills of the two called Rek Barker and Nels Bronson, and had cut them out.

There were the five relevant minds: Rek, Nels, Zaney Smith, Dave Armet, and Bill Hanes. Three types of minds. Rek and Nels were without mercy, thinking only of what could bring them power, satisfaction of lust, or riches. Zaney Smith was more to her liking. He was an extremely sensitive mind that had found life cruel, and retreated into the solitude of space, driven by the urge to escape social contact that he feared would lead to further hurt. Because he couldn't willingly hurt anyone himself, he would risk hurt by her to rescue her from her prison. He had loved deeply once, long ago when he was young, and had been hurt by the one he loved.

Dave Armet and Bill Hanes were evidently the norm of the race of humans of this star and its planets she found herself among. Their code was a social one, their adjustment to life quite practical. They would risk their lives to rescue her, and take only what she gave them freely, since they were not predatory.

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A vague unease stirred in her thughts. There was a strong possibility that it might wind up with Zaney, Dave, and Bill dead, and herself in the power of the one called Rek. He was cunning and extremely intelligent along with his unscrupulousness. Wise though she herself was, she realized that Rek was her equal in wits. He stood a chance of outsmarting her.

On the other hand, Dave was clear thinking, and his partner Bill had the reckless courage to possibly upset any scheme Rek might devise to exert pressure on her. It had been that recklessness she had played on voicelessly to tip the balances so that he followed Dave rather than going to Mars and bringing the S.P..

Bea-Anna hadn't wanted the knowledge of her existence to be known too widely—yet. With five or twenty minds in an isolated sea of space she could feel able to deal with things. With five billion minds impinging on consciousness she would be lost.

When she became free it would be different. When she could command her hands and fingers, when she could command her legs and they would carry her where she willed, she could feel able to cope with anything.

Until then, she had only her mind. And it would take science such as only she in this part of the universe knew to free her, for her prison was no ordinary thing of bars and walls.

She sensed Rek and Nels walking along the shell of the ship, examining its pitted condition and trying to estimate its age. Her timeless smile remained on her full red lips. But in her mind tendrils of fear crawled uneasily.

"FROM THE looks of this shell," Nels said, "the ship must be over a thousand years old. How could the dame be any good if she's that old?"

"Forget her," Rek said. "If she's worth having she's mine anyway. But what we're mostly interested in is the secrets this ship contains in the way of weapons. And the secret of anti-gravity. With that and what we have on Lark Planetoid we can run the rocket-propelled space ship business out of existence. With the weapons we can rule the System."

"Not to mention evening a few scores," Nels said grimly.

They had reached the airlock now. They drew their guns, the deadly bazooka-type automatic pistol that could send its bullets through five inch armor plate without the slightest recoil, and stepped into the lock.

The ship-pressure gauge showed zero.

"No air inside!" Rek exclaimed. "I wonder. . ."

"Wonder what?" Nels asked.

"If there's no air," Rek said slowly. "Maybe this dame isn't human. Telepathy's a funny thing. Maybe she can't even talk, actually. Her thoughts might come out like the voice of a sweet young thing in our minds because she made it that way. We'd better be careful."

The inner door pushed open under Rek's touch. A cloud of dust rose about the two men as they stepped into the corridor on the other side of the open door.

After they had taken a few steps the dust was a thick cloud. Nels' foot kicked something solid. He picked it up. Holding it close to his helmet he could see it.

It was a chunk of what had once been some sort of plastic floor covering. It was crumbling into dust in his grasp.

"Look at this, Rek," he said. "How long would it take asphalt tile or

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rubber tile to turn to dust? A million years?"

"Not very long," Rek said, examining the stuff. "But we can't do very much exploring in this dust. Let's take the ship in tow and go to Lark Planetoid. There we can take our time pulling things apart, and get this dust cleaned out before trying to explore."

"Might as well, Rek," Nels agreed. "Probably nothing will operate anyway, if the insulation's rotted off all the wires."

"O.K.," Rek said, starting back to the airlock. "Have the men unscrew our needle-nose so we can push this baby. I'll start figuring the trajectory."

DAVE ARMET kept his eyes on his radar screen, thinking how hazardous space travel would be without it. Nothing could appear on it that wasn't within a half million miles of the ship—and everything within that distance showed. Without radar it would have been impossible to pick out every little thing near the ship as it sped through the vacuum of space. With it, the almost unbroken blanket of light from the stars didn't show at all.

But there was a worried frown on his face. The automatic pilot was braking the ship to adjust to the orbit data fed into it—but there was no alien ship or anything else there.

What had happened? There was a remote chance that the thing had been knocked off its orbit by some small asteroid striking it or coming close to it; but if that were so it would still be close enough so it would appear on the radar screen, and none of those small dots on the screen were a ship.

But wait! A new dot had emerged on the screen. Dave rushed to the telescope and examined it. It was a ship, all right. No doubt about it.

"Damn!" he muttered aloud, angrily. Then he laughed.

It was Zaney Smith's ship that was supposed to be well on its way to Mars. Bill Hanes had pulled a fast one and circled back instead of going to Mars. Dave had thought Bill had given in too easily. This was the reason.

He went over and trained his radio reflector-antenna in the direction of Zaney's ship.

"I'll have you shot when we get to Mars, Bill," he said into the mike with mock anger.

"You'll never take me alive, Renfrew," Bill's voice taunted. "I have the fastest ship in the galaxy, a trusty crew, and the queen of the May as hostage. Woo woo!"

"Shut up," Dave said. "And tell me, can you see that mystery ship in your radar screen? It should be right here, and it's nowhere in sight."

"How can I tell you and shut up?" Bill answered. He did a double take. "What! You mean that ship's gone?" There was a moment of silence. "Rek Barker must have taken it," he added. "Probably taking it to his base, wherever that is."

"Get over here," Dave ordered. "We'll have to work fast."

"O.K.," Bill said. "Wait for me."

"Haven't got time," Dave answered. "I'm going back along the mystery ship's orbit to about the point where Rek Barker must have picked it up. He probably doesn't know anyone's after him, and won't try to hide his exhaust tail."

"I get it!" Bill said. "You can put the short focus eyepiece on our telescope and stick in an NP filter, and the exhaust gases will appear as a fog against the star background. I should be with you to run the ship though. You can't do both things at once."

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Both ships were now zooming ahead toward the point where Rek Barker must have started.

"I'll be able to manage," Dave said. "And we're better off with two ships. If one of us gets caught by Barker the other can probably get away and go for help. We're on the trail of something big, even without the mystery ship. If we can capture Rek Barker and his gang and find their hideout we get ten percent of the value of recovered loot plus all the rewards. That should be enough so that YOU can be queen of the May."

"Gee!" Bill said. Then, "Naw. I don't wanta. I'd rather have enough to buy the queen of the May."

"Well," Dave said into his microphone, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "You could buy a nice, sleek space cruiser and christen it the Queen of the May."

"And man it—I mean woman it with a dozen or so beautiful girls," Bill said dreamily. "Maybe even the female in that mystery ship would sign up. If she has the secret of immortality we could all roam from star to star and get the human race started on thousands of planets with my children."

"You ain't man enough, son," Dave laughed. "I still remember how you fainted when you were cornered by that pretty little thing at Moon Station that wanted to go with you."

"That was my malaria creeping up on me," Bill said, half angrily.

"THIS IS a tougher job than I expected it to be," Rek growled.

It was the seventeenth time he had miscalculated centers of gravity and sent the two ships into a spin. The other ship's mass was enormous for its size. And Rek was beginning to suspect that it shifted around every so often just to make him miscalculate and start spinning.

"Why don't you pull the thing instead of pushing it?" one of the crew groaned.

"We'd never go anyplace that way," Rek growled. "Our thrust would be all against the other ship then, and do nothing except keep the grapple cable taut."

Most of the crew was seasick. Nels was hardest hit, lying in his bunk, groaning. Rek alone was on his feet and with a clear head, and more than once he had felt the desire to give in and be sick.

But in spite of the spins that brought to a halt the constant thrust of the rockets, they had made good time. They were coming close to Lark Planetoid. Caution born of long habit was rising in Rek's control of the ship.

He was well acquainted with the tricks of following a ship by tracking its exhaust gases. He knew that with the right filters in a wide view telescope, exhaust gases would appear as a moving cloud, and, since they left the rocket chamber at a constant speed, and lost temperature at a constant rate, anyone knowing how could analyze those exhaust gases and determine with a close degree of accuracy just where the ship from which they originated was, at that particular moment.

He also knew a few tricks to shake off possible pursuit, and was using them now.

Shutting off the rockets, he coasted for a few hours. Then, maneuvering his ship about by small thrusts from the axis and auxiliary control rockets, he fired the main rockets in a direction at right angles to his line of flight.

He did this until his ship had almost reached the same speed as the rocket gases themselves, then stopped

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the rockets. The reason for this was so that no exhaust gases would be crossing the path he had left, to point the way to his new path.

He did this several times, each maneuver taking him a few hundred thousand miles closer to Lark Planetoid. In the end it was an absolute impossibility for anyone to follow him by tracking his rocket stream.

Satisfied that he was safe from pursuit, he headed directly for his home base.

Lark Planetoid, by some strange freak of Cosmic Chance, was a hollow sphere of lava rock. Thirty miles in diameter, its crust was almost a uniform five miles thick, leaving a hollow center roughly twenty miles across.

There was even a natural entrance to its center through a rough opening almost two miles across. It was as if a molten drop of lava had been tossed into space, and expanded, bubble-like, from internal gases until it had nearly solidified; and then punctured, releasing the imprisoned gases.

Its non-reflecting surface made Lark Planetoid invisible. It actually couldn't be seen with a telescope until magnification brought it up to within a half million miles, and then only if the observer knew exactly where to look for it.

Rek Barker had been a legitimate space prospector until he discovered the freak asteroid. With its discovery he had started to dream of piracy. From dreams to actuality had been a natural step. Offhand he could name twenty or thirty men who would be glad to join in with him on such a venture, once they knew there was such a hideway where untold loot could be stored.

If Lark Planetoid had been discovered by the S.P.'s, they would have built an airlock in its two mile puncture and built a space station inside, with a gigantic city, self-contained. Rek Barker and his men had merely brought captured space-liners and guided them inside, anchoring them, and using them for the segments of a giant city.

Here were perhaps five hundred permanent prisoners, kept alive to do the chores and to sort and store the more marketable loot brought in with each ship.

And here, occasionally, came a furtive freighter, to pick up a cargo of riches to take back to Earth or Mars for slow disposal in regular trade chanels. Here also, from time to time, came sleek space yachts owned by bankers and financial giants who owed their existence and their wealth to Rek Barker.

Rek, in spite of his roughness and his love of raw cruelty that found its vent in piracy, was an organizing genius, and had built around himself a syndicate that was more detailed and elaborate in its ramifications than most legitimate inter-planetary industries. He had built his empire by searching for and finding genius akin to his own, and financing it. His mistakes had been very few —and had been quickly erased.

THE GUARDS in their camouflaged stations that rimmed the hole in Lark Planetoid studied the pitted space ship that Rek's deft maneuvering guided toward and past them and their concealed rocket missiles.

They continued to watch as anchored grapples inside the hollow planetoid shot out and gripped the mystery ship, drawing it firmly to rest against the inner crust of the rock bubble.

When it had been firmly secured, the grapple from Rek's ship dropped away and was reeled in. Small bursts

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from guide rockets sent Rek's ship across the inner void toward the sleek hull of what had once been the prize liner of the Trans Space Lines passenger fleet, but which was now his central headquarters.

Here, other eyes watched in amazement, startled at the realization that this new addition to Rek's collection of prizes was no ship ever built by modern man, but one from some unknown civilization, built before the human race had learned to escape the gravitation of Earth and cross the void of space.

Bea-Anna sensed these curious minds, isolated them one by one and studied them, and from them fitted together a picture of Rek's organization.

The vague fear that had lain in her mind flared almost into panic. She had underestimated this man. Her thoughts became bitterly self-condemnatory as she realized she should have destroyed him while she was still free in space.

She could still destroy him. But she couldn't cut the anchors that were even now being welded to the hull of her ship to anchor it forever to this wandering hollow sphere of rock.

The realization rose slowly into her mind that this was the end of her wanderings through space. There could be only two possibilities for the future now; death, or freedom from her age-long prison.

It might be death.

But there was still one small hope...

She reached out carefully with her mind, searching.

"What do we do now?" Bill Hanes' voice sounded over the loudspeaker. "It's obvious Rek Barker was deliberately going through a routine shake-off to keep anybody from following his tail to his hideout."

"Yeah," Dave said slowly. "If he had known positively we were following him, he'd have turned back and either killed us or captured us. It must have been just a precaution. It would take a hundred ships to follow him from here, and his trail is pretty old."

"Then we're stuck," Bill's voice sounded, disappointed. "Too bad. Wonder if it would do any good to just look?"

"We're probably within a million miles of his hideout right now," Dave said. "But which way? And what does it look like? There are fifty-two dots on my radar screen. One of them could be his hideout. We'd probably find Mobey Dick before we found him!"

"What's Mobey Dick?"

"Mobey Dick is—why you know what Mobey Dick is, you lug," Dave said.

"What're you talking about?" Bill's voice sounded.

"Didn't you just ask me what Mobey Dick was?" Dave asked doubtfully. In his mind the conviction was quickly forming that it hadn't been Bill's voice that framed that question.

"Are you getting spacey?" Bill asked.

"Shut up a minute, Bill," Dave said. He closed his eyes and concentrated.

NUMBERS were running through his thoughts. They were in the pattern of orbit data. Crazy memory? Could be, he thought. The numbers repeated themselves more solidly. There was something familiar in the *feel* of them as they ran into his mind. He tried to place this while he wrote the numbers down. Suddenly it came to him.

"Hey Bill," he said excitedly into the microphone of his radio. "Are you

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having any orbit data numbers running through your mind right this minute?"

"No," Bill said. "Now I know your spacey. Or should I say Zaney?"

"It doesn't matter," Dave said. "About the numbers, I mean. That female on the mystery ship just contacted me and gave me the orbit data on Rek's hideout. I'm positive!"

"Where is it?" Bill asked.

Dave went to the orienter and did a little mental arithmetic. He went back to the microphone.

"Less than a million miles from here," he said. "That proves it. If it had been just a chance remembering of some set of orbit figures, it would be somewhere else."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Bill asked. "Let's go!"

"You know," Dave said, "I'm beginning to like that babe, whoever or whatever she is. It could be she isn't even human, you know."

"That might be an improvement," Bill said dryly. "But I agree with you. It looks to me like she deliberately let Rek take her to his hideout so she could lead us to it."

Dave gave Bill the orbit data, and fed it into his own automatic pilot. That device quickly set up the equations that gave rocket thrust and charge to carry the ship along the most efficient trajectory to its destination, and the time it would take, flashing the time it would take onto the small glass rectangle on the control board. Bill was doing the same thing aboard Zaney Smith's ship.

"Seven hours," Dave spoke into the mike. "We'd better get ready to cut to manual control in five, and see what we're up against. I think I'll take a nap until then. How about you?"

"Sure," Bill answered. "Wait a minute. I just thought of a swell idea. We've got two ships. Suppose we set our course to arrive in that orbit at a spot a few hours behind the destination, and set up Zaney's ship in the same orbit? Then if something happens we can maybe use an ace in the hole like a good ship coasting along, easy to get at from where we'll be."

"That's too good an idea for you to get all by yourself," Dave kidded. "Sounds wonderful. I'm glad I thought of it." Laughing at his own joke, he cut the mike and fed the new data to the auto-pilot. Then he set the ship alarm and promptly went to sleep.

REK BARKER grunted in satisfaction as he watched the special built vacuum cleaner do its work. The men running it were part of a crew he had brought to Lark Planetoid on a captured freighter. Altogether over ten tons of dust had been taken from the mystery ship. That dust had once been floor covering, seat upholstering, wall paint, and almost anything non-metallic that had existed on the ship.

In drawers had been books and charts, seemingly intact. The first solid appearing book that had suddenly dissolved into molecular powder under the faintest touch of his finger had startled him. He had blinked his eyes and tried to think how long it would take for a heavy book, undisturbed, to turn completely to dust. There were paper or parchment writings in museums on Earth that were five thousand years old, and still firm in texture. The thought staggered him.

He explored as the ship was cleared of dust. There was a feeling of awe in him as he examined the neat welding of bulkhead to bulkhead, as he realized that this ship must have been built long before the earliest known

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history of mankind.

"It might even have been built a hundred thousand years ago!" he thought; and Bea-Anna, reading his mind, smiled lazily, sensing his inability to imagine a span of ten million Earth years.

The slow smile faded. Panic struggled briefly to dominate her. Slowly she forced her emotions into quiescence. She let thought lie idle until the pool of consciousness was undisturbed by so much as a faint ripple of fear.

The smile returned to her lips. She was ready now, to make her first move.

A sharp click sounded in the stillness of her prison chamber as a thought-sensitive relay jumped to form a contact. The crystalline structure of one wall of her self-contained world altered so that it became as transparent as glass.

She let her eyes open slightly. On the other side of that transparent wall, still unaware of her, stood the creature who knew himself as Rek Barker. Her red lips opened in relief. Until now she had not been sure. Now she knew that these minds she had contacted were in bodies belonging to a race identical with, if not the same as her own. Rek Barker was a man.

Long dormant memory compared him with those of her own race of humans. His back was turned to her. His head was normal. His shoulders were slightly wider than the norm. In proper clothing he might have passed for one of her own race, from in back.

"Turn around and face me, Rek Barker," she commanded mentally.

She saw his shoulders stiffen, his head come erect. He turned slowly, seeming to take an eternity, his hand creeping toward the weapon he wore at his hip.

Half turned, he suddenly became a blur of motion as he completed his movement to face her. He stopped in a half crouch, his weapon pointed toward her. His eyes were mere slits. His lips were formed in a wolfish snarl that hung there forgotten as his eyes came to focus on her.

The short-cropped hair along his temples began to move queerly, as though it had muscles of its own and was trying to stand erect from his scalp. A vein in his temple began to throb rhythmically. His slitted eyes came open, pushing up his eyebrows until they were rounded.

His mouth opened in what appeared to be a half yawn. But there was no sleepiness in his mind. Instead there was only pure horror.

THAT HORROR puzzled her. It wasn't fear. It wasn't even related to fear. And now his actions proved it was not fear. His jaw snapped shut. His lips compressed with determination. His knuckle whitened against the trigger of his weapon. A sharp report hit her ears painfully as something struck the transparent wall with tremendous force. The structure of the wall shifted, causing the view of Rek Barker to blur.

"Stop that!" Bea-Anna commanded sharply.

Rek Barker emerged again through the cloudy wall. Sanity was creeping into his eyes, his body. Sanity—and a growing curiosity. And pity!

Pity! Her smile broadened. This man might be more to her liking than she had believed would be possible.

"I am Bea-Anna," she telepathed.

"Bea-Anna." She watched him form the name with his lips and felt a thrill shoot through her. It had been ten million years since she had seen human lips form speech she could

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read visually. A long time...

Ten million? No. She had forgotten. Only two million years ago near a star twenty or thirty lightyears away she had watched a man form her name with his lips. But he had not had the science to free her from her prison...

"Do I look so strange to you?" Bea-Anna telepathed.

"N-no." She watched his lips. His language was strange, but simple and easy to master. "It's just that—don't you have a body?"

His question startled her. Then she laughed. The distortion and refraction of the wall and the transparent case about her prison had revealed only her head to him, and that an enormous thing, magnified dozens of times. She explained this to him.

"And of course I have a body," she concluded demurely. A faint blush warmed her skin at his desire to see more of her. "I can't move," she said. "My body is immersed in this chemical bath that preserves me. But I assure you that I'm entirely—normal according to your standards."

She cut off the telepathic contact abruptly to hide the rest of her thoughts. Giving him a friendly smile, she sent the telepathed command that cut the relay affecting the crystalline structure of the wall.

Staring at the once more blank surface, she thrilled to the rapid beat of her heart. It had been a long time since she had felt like this.

REK'S THOUGHTS came to her, insistent, demanding to know how to get to her.

"I want to free you," he pleaded. "You're too beautiful to be imprisoned like that." The background of his thoughts was full of promise, lust, and treachery.

Disgust made her cut off all contact with him. As an antidote she let her consciousness roam in search of the two in space, Dave and Bill. They were asleep, their ships far out from this small planet, but coming toward it. She searched for the other, Zaney Smith. His thoughts were angry, bitter. He was muttering a meaningless phrase under his breath as he wielded a mop on a nearby ship. What was a "zaney prospector"? And what did "damme" mean? He had made such a habit of using this expression that it no longer was connected with any thought in his mind.

She let her mind come back to Rek Barker, refreshed from its contact with others. Rek was still demanding to know how to rescue her.

"I can tell you," she telepathed. "Whether or not you have the science to do it is another thing. I doubt if you yourself could begin to understand how to go about rescuing me."

"If I don't know how," he answered. "I can take my pick of the smartest scientists in the Solar System to do it for me." There was boastful pride in his tone; but there was also truth.

"Very well," she said with sudden determination. "This wall about my prison, were you surprised that your weapon had no effect on it? I read in your mind that your weapon should have at least marred its surface, and that it didn't leave the slightest mark where it struck. The very fact that I was able to hear its impact demonstrated the force with which it landed.

"The wall is not of matter as your science knows it, but of what would be known to your science as neutral nuclei, atoms whose orbit electrons have been collapsed onto the nucleus itself. Neutron matter would be the most accurate of coined words for it. No, I see you know of deuterons.

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Polytron substance would be the exact term. It's hundreds of times denser and tougher than matter as it is ordinarily found. In fact, your toughest steel is as a gas in comparison."

She sensed the questions rising into his thoughts.

"No," she said, smiling. "I'm not built of polytron matter. I'm of ordinary matter, just as you. But I'm completely walled in by polytron matter. It will take science such as you and your race have never known to reach me. Power such as is not found in nature, even in the hottest of suns."

"Whatever it takes," Rek said. "I'll get it." She read his added, unexpressed thought: "And whatever you reveal to my scientists, I'll use for my own ends afterwards."

"It's not so much a question of equipment as it is ability to understand what to do," Bea-Anna answered the thought he had wanted her to read. "It might be that even you, without sharing the secret with others unnecessarily, could accomplish my rescue."

She saw she had struck the right note in him. And she wished what she had said could be true. With a man like Rek Barker it would only be working with justice to destroy him after she was free, and keep him from using the powers that he would acquire in the act of freeing her.

"However," she went on hastily before he could answer. Then she paused. An idea had crept into her thoughts that might be just the thing to make Rek Barker harmless.

She forgot him momentarily, considering that idea from every angle.

"However what?" Rek asked.

"No," she said, as though thinking to herself. "You would be afraid."

"Me?" Rek said. "Ha ha ha."

"But you would," Bea-Anna said sweetly. "You would have to let me probe into your mind—deeply. You would be completely at my mercy. I would be able to destroy you if I chose to. And once you allowed me to do this you could never prevent me from doing it again. Right now all I can read of your thoughts is what you wish me to read. After that it would be different You could never hide a single thought from me that I wished to hear. And at any time I wished I could kill you without warning, with a thought."

SHE STUDIED his thoughts anxiously, watching his reaction. A new confidence grew in her. She began to feel that she would be able to cope with this mind of Rek Barker.

"That I couldn't take," he said suddenly. "We'll have to risk your knowledge with someone else. I'll find someone."

"I had expected that," Bea-Anna telepathed. "You haven't survived by placing yourself at the mercies of others. So I have called a man who has nothing to fear from me. He and his companion are even now approaching this place."

"What!" Rek exploded.

But already Bea-Anna could sense Rek's mind sifting the possibilities. He had accepted the implication that she couldn't hurt him unless he opened his mind to her, not suspecting that his mind was already open to her, and that she could kill him now if she wished. He was figuring the possibilities inherent in this new development.

Uppermost in his mind was the feeling that he held the highest cards. Everything was falling right into his little hollow world where he held absolute power, and from which no one could escape.

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"Who is this man you've called?" Rek asked.

"A prospector named Dave Armet," Bea-Anna replied. "When I sent out my call, he and his companion were the only other ones besides you and your crew, and Zaney Smith, who were within receiving distance."

"Then when they get here," Rek said thoughtfully, "everyone who knows of your existence will be right here in the interior of Lark Planetoid."

"That's right," Bea-Anna said.

"And your power to contact minds isn't great enough to reach any others from here?" Rek asked.

"That's right," Bea-Anna reiterated. "I've tried."

"Then that sort of drops things in my lap," Rek said. "What I mean is that—" He licked his lips in satisfaction. "If I can't get you out of your prison shell, you're stuck here forever."

"I know that, Rek Barker," Bea-Anna admitted.

"Then I'm the boss," Rek said. "We'll do things my way."

"What do you mean?" Bea-Anna asked sharply.

"I mean," Rek said slowly. "I'll capture this Dave Armet alive. You'll tell him how to get you free, and also tell him to tell me. I want to know the secrets you have before I let you free. If I don't get them, you'll stay where you are, forever."

"GOT HER set?" Dave asked.

"Right on the beam," Bill Hanes said, sliding out of his space suit with a grunt of relief. "Zaney's ship will stay in its orbit indefinitely. Its guide rockets'll adjust for minor perturbations."

"Take a look at that small planet through the telescope," Dave said. "It must be Rek's hideout, but it's too small to hide anything. Maybe his buildings are underground."

Bill looked through the telescope. Magnification brought the black disc quite close. And that was all it was, a black disc in the blanket of stars. But as he let his eyes adjust to it, he began to see the faint reflection of sunlight that lit three quarters of it.

"Seems to be black lava rock," he said to Dave.

"And pretty small," Dave said grimly. "The chances of our landing on it without being seen are practically non-existent."

"Then why land?" Bill asked. "Why not report this to the Space Patrol and let them move in?"

"We'll swing past it at about thirty thousand miles an hour," Dave said. "Maybe we can see some sign of Rek Barker's place and get an idea of what we're up against. I don't think that chunk of rock's more than thirty miles in diameter."

"I'll keep studying it," Bill said. "If I see anything I'll tell you."

"Hah! Look at the radar image of it," Dave said.

On the radar screen the planetoid was now a bright circle almost two inches across. Slightly off center in the bright disc was a small gray spot that diminished to a dark point.

"That's funny," Bill said. "What could cause that? Do you suppose the thing's hollow?"

"Check with the telescope," Dave suggested.

"I can see light where that spot is," Bill said from the telescope. "Maybe that's where Rek's hiding place is. Suppose we land somewhere on the other side and walk around. We might be able to do that without being detected."

"I was considering that myself," Dave said, altering their course.

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Suddenly the radio loudspeaker came to life.

"Dave Armet," it said, "you have been seen. Begin deceleration for landing at once or we'll send a robomb up to intercept you."

"How the heck do they know my name?" Dave exclaimed.

"You have five minutes to answer before we loose the robomb," the voice added. Its tones carried finality.

Dave plucked the microphone from its prongs and flicked the transmitter switch.

"Who's talking? Rek Barker?" he asked.

"This is Rek Barker," a new voice spoke.

"How'd you know my name?" Dave asked.

There was a gloating laugh.

"Bea-Anna told me your name," Rek said. "She didn't want anybody running to the S.P.'s. We decided the safest way to get you here was to let you come yourself."

"Dead men carry no tales sort of business?" Dave asked bitterly.

"Not exactly," Rek said. "We have a use for you and your partner, Bill. If you behave maybe you'll live. Start decelerating."

"O.K.," Dave said angrily. He shut off the transmitter and set the pilot to match speed with the planetoid. At once the ship swung about and began firing its rockets toward it.

Bill and Dave through long habit compensated for the half g acceleration almost unconsciously, paying no attention to it.

"So that's why she gave me the orbit data on Rek's hideout!" Dave muttered.

"And that's why I turned around instead of going to Mars to report it to the S.P.'s," Bill said in soft amazement. "I thought at the time, 'Bill, this isn't like you.' I can realize now that that female put the thought in my mind. She's dangerous."

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it now," Dave said bitterly. "If we try to get away we could never escape a robomb. Those things can accelerate at ten g's, and once they're within radar range they never let go. A robomb would catch us within five hours."

"Maybe it isn't hopeless," Bill said. "We still have Zaney Smith's ship back there, and with this planetoid only thirty miles in diameter we can acquire escape velocity in one jump and guide ourselves to the ship."

"Do you think that female doesn't know what we did with Zaney's ship?" Dave asked.

"Say—" Bill began. A startled light appeared in his eyes. He hesitated, then clamped his lips tight and said nothing.

"SO HERE we are all together," Rek said, a sardonic smile on his cruel face.

He lifted his wine glass and drank, then sat it down with a clump on the linen table cover. Zaney Smith, Dave Armet, Bill Hanes, and Nels looked at the glass expectantly, to see if it would break and spill its red contents over the cloth. It didn't.

"Everybody that knows anything about Bea-Anna is right here on Lark Planetoid," Rek continued. "Right under my thumb. I suppose you wonder why I let you live, Dave Armet. Well, Bea-Anna and I have a use for you. She says you have the ability to understand how to get her out of her polytron prison shell. She's going to tell you, and you're going to tell me in words of one syllable so I can understand. You do like you're told and I'll see that you are a rich man when this is all over."

"What are you treatin' me so darn

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nice for?" Zaney Smith asked. "I'm no use to you any more. Why waste good wine and food on me. It isn't like you, Rek Barker. You should kill me like you're going to kill Dave Armet when you have no more use for him."

There was murder in Rek's eyes for a moment. Then his expression slowly changed to tolerant good humor.

"Now, Zaney," he said. "You've got me all wrong. Sure I roughened you up a bit when I first got you. But this thing's so big I decided to be nice to everybody. I'm even going to do all right by you. From now on you help Dave and Bill. O.K.?"

"I'll help them w r e c k your schemes," Zaney said.

"Bea-Anna wouldn't like that, Zaney," Rek said. "And she likes you. She told me so."

"You mean the old witch is a cannibal?" Zaney said. He cackled on the verge of hysteria.

"Don't talk that way about her," Rek said. "She's a beauty. I've seen her. You'll get a chance to see her too."

Zaney shuddered. It was more expressive of his feelings than words.

"Suppose we don't want to help you?" Bill spoke up. "What could you do about it?"

"Let's not talk about unpleasant things while we eat," Rek said. "I'm sure you must know that there are ways of making a person do anything told them—just for the relief of getting it over so they can die and escape their suffering as soon as possible."

Now it was Bill's turn to shudder. The way Rek had said it, it was apparent that he had actually witnessed people breaking under torture and wanting to get killed.

"Are you sure Bea-Anna isn't playing you for a sucker like she played us?" Dave asked, smiling calmly. "You're a smart man, Rek. You don't have the restrictions of civilization like I would have. You can drive straight toward your goal. But don't forget that the pitting on that duro-steel hull of her ship shows she's so old that you were just born yesterday compared to her."

"Don't worry about me," Rek said. "I can handle her. She's my kind."

"Yeah. I know," Dave said dryly. He lifted his wine glass and sipped, wondering what ship it had been taken off of, and how many people on the ship had been killed.

Rek grinned at him.

"As a matter of fact," he said. "I didn't get that wine off of a ship, Dave. I bought it on Earth and brought it here."

He laughed at the startled look in Dave's eyes. Bea-Anna had read Dave's thought and telepathed it to him. He read Dave's slow realization of what had happened and felt disappointed. He had hoped Dave would think he could read minds too.

"O.K.," Dave said. "When do we start to work?"

"Get a good rest," Rek said. "Plenty of time to start in after you've had some sleep. And just so you'll all be happy I have a special room where you can all be together."

"DID YOU get to see Bea-Anna when you were on her ship, Zaney?" Dave asked.

The three of them were in the stateroom Rek Barker had given them. The door was locked and bared on the outside. They were prisoners.

"No," Zaney said. He was chewing at his beard. His boney hands were dry-washing each other. The wine at dinner had awakened a great thirst

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that was making his nerves start to scream.

"What did you see?" Dave asked.

"I—I went onto her ship," Zaney said. "The shell is made of durosteel, and from its corrosion I'd guess that it's a million years old—"

"A million years!" Dave exclaimed. "But that would be impossible. Or would it?"

"You'll probably get a chance to see for yourself," Zaney said. "I was trying to be conservative. You know what durosteel is. You've read the ads on it. There's a durosteel bottle full of every known type of corrosive chemical, and for fifty years those bottles haven't shown the least sign of being touched by anything. Lie, all kinds of acids and bacterias. And there's a test piece that's been heated to five thousand degrees and cooled over ten thousand times without losing its mirror finish. So a durosteel shell that's pitted like the surface of a rusted lake boat hull must be pretty old. A darn sight older than the Sphinx."

"But that would mean—" Bill began.

"That Bea-Anna is about as old," Zaney said. "But that's to be expected. She and her ship must have come from some other planetary system. That would take plenty of years, even from one only ten or fifteen light years away."

"She can't be human, then," Dave said.

"Oh yes she is," Zaney said quickly.

"So you've seen her," Dave said.

"No, but Rek has, and he told me about her," Zaney said. "He said she's young and beautiful. I don't doubt it. It's the young and beautiful ones that make suckers out of us."

"So she's young and beautiful," Dave said. "That means she has the secret of immortality. No wonder Rek wants her. If he can get that secret—"

"Me, I think she's playing him for a sucker too," Zaney said. "It was her idea to get everybody that knows she exists into this one spot. You can't tell me she won't be able to wipe us all out once she's free. And then she can do as she pleases. Why do you think she was imprisoned in the first place? Probably where she came from she was too dangerous to let stay around. They put her in a prison she couldn't escape from, and set it adrift in interstellar space."

"I've been wondering about that angle myself," Bill Hanes said.

"I think you've got that wrong," Dave said. "Look at it this way. She's been travelling through space for, let's say, a million years. Long enough so that even durosteel wears down. Maybe her prison isn't a prison at all. Maybe it's just a protective shell inside the ship. Maybe she's living in a sort of balanced aquarium, and the controls that would free her are on the outside—or part of them—and have become unable to operate because they're too old. Insulation off, making shorts in wires. Source of power dissipated. Maybe for the first thousand years she could have gotten out any time she wanted. Then it wasn't originally a prison, but just a setup in which she could survive crossing from one star to another, in search of other humans."

"Then why did she lead you into a trap?" Zaney asked.

"Your saying she's human explains a lot of things," Dave said, smiling sourly. "Maybe she's fallen for Rek Barker. Maybe where she comes from a man like him is admired. Or maybe she hasn't learned he's a killer. There's cases where even nice girls fall in love with killers and stick by

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them. He's the first man she's seen in a long time, you know."

"Huh," Zaney snorted.

"The thing I can't understand," Bill said thoughtfully, "is why she's made no attempt to contact us since we got here. It looks bad. It makes it look like maybe Zaney's right, and she just wanted to lead us to where Rek could capture us, so we wouldn't go to Mars and tell about her."

"Maybe," Dave said. "But she's been reading my thoughts. She read my thought about the wine and telepathed it to Rek." He frowned. "Funny about that. It's almost like she wanted me to know indirectly that she is in contact with my mind all the time."

DAVE AND BILL examined the hollow interior of Lark Planetoid curiously as they stood poised on the platform extending out from Rek's headquarters ship that served as a landing field for spacesuited figures in this gravity-less world. Here and there on the vast inner surface were clusters of ships that protruded like ripe grapes in the feebly lit space.

"What the government could do to make this into a space station!" Dave thought.

Diagonally across the hollow interior could be seen a small disk of stars through the two mile opening to the outside. Sweeping in smooth curvature from this disc was the blackness of night, molded into a dome, giving the impression of being solid shadow.

"All right, follow me," Rek's voice cut in through the suit radio.

He crouched on the platform and sprang upward. They followed. When they were a hundred feet up, they could look down and see the panorama of ships clustered together around Rek's headquarters.

On the outer fringe of this group was the mystery ship, different from the others in its spherical shape as compared to the cigar shape of all solar ships.

Rek pointed a hand rocket in back of him and fired. His suited body moved toward the mystery ship. Dave and Bill followed him, not needing any coaxing from the guards that stayed close to them. Zaney followed more erratically.

When they landed on the pitted shell Dave bent down to study the erosion. Instantly he knew what had caused it. He straightened, his thoughts churning speculatively. But he said nothing.

There was a short wait in the airlock until pressures equalized, then they were inside the ship.

Rek led the way along a passage that was of about the same dimensions as those of ordinary ships, indicating that it was built for creatures the same size as humans if they weren't themselves human.

Finally they came to a large room where Rek halted, facing a blank wall expectantly. The wall was a dull gray except for a smear that appeared to have been made by something spattering.

Now, as Dave watched, the blank wall began to change. It was becoming translucent, light coming from its depths. Almost abruptly it became transparent.

Dave was prepared for almost anything except what he saw. There was a large shallow thing shaped somewhat like a wine glass, with vari-colored bubbles dripping over its rim to a large pool below.

Rising from this overflowing bowl was a gigantic head. Each detail of it seared into his shocked mind; but

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with each monstrous fact, some voice in his mind seemed to account for its monstrousness, so that when the first shock wore off he knew that though he was seeing what seemed to be a gigantic head, it was in reality no larger than his own, and it was that of Bea-Anna.

Hidden from view, immersed in the bubbling liquid, was her body. He closed his eyes to hide the scene. Instantly he could see her as he felt she really was, slim, longlegged, graceful, and mature. In his mind's eye she opened her eyes and her lips opened in a smile. He opened his eyes. Her huge head, seen through the wall, was the counterpart of his mental image in its expression.

Had he in some way *seen* telepathically?

His heart was pounding. His thoughts were a spiral of mixed-up things, some of which seemed to come from outside him. He shook his head and closed his eyes again. At once the mental image of Bea-Anna returned in full vividness.

"That's better," a voice murmured, and it was her voice.

BEA-ANNA! Her name repeated itself endlessly in his mind. And in his mind's eye she stood before him, her nude body half revealed through a film of sluggish currents in a luminescent fluid, her expression one of intense concentration masked by a lazy smile.

In the background of his mind something was going on that he could only vaguely sense. He remembered the first time he had rode up from the Earth on a Moon excursion ship. The heavens of black space had emerged through the blue of the Earth sky in the same way the horizons of his mind were now expanding.

At first it was just thoughts. Thoughts were running into his conscious mind and sinking into subconsciousness faster than he could read them.

Then, slowly, the tenor of things changed. The change was as subtle as the difference between a thought and an emotion. Bea-Anna had reached into the very foundations of his mind. Like a superhuman surgeon she was deftly operating, cutting, altering, remaking him.

He became aware of other sources of thought emerging into his consciousness. They were bodiless, strange, yet also familiar. With part of his mind he listened to them, watched them. One by one he identified them.

They were the thoughts of those around him. Bill, Zaney, Rek! Was Bea-Anna bringing him those thoughts?

Suddenly he knew she had not. She had in some way made it possible for him to be aware of the thoughts of those around him within himself!

Her image in his mind's eye nodded in agreement. Her voice spoke.

"Every mind has within itself the power to be as I am," it said. "Your early training, the inhibitions set up in you by the beliefs of your elders, prevented the development of these powers. All I have done is cut away the inhibitions and laid out channels to bring these things to consciousness. I haven't done this with anyone else. You must keep it secret."

Dave Armet became aware that he was breathing, that his heart was beating, of the heavy closeness of his space suit. He opened his eyes.

The gigantic head of Bea-Anna looked at him through the heavy-matter wall from its resting place in the cup. His ears began to hear the breathing of his companions, and the

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small static noises in his suit radio.

"Quite a shock, huh?" Rek's voice sounded. "She ain't really that way. It's just the magnification in the wall that makes her seem that way."

"Yeah, quite a shock," Dave answered. He was realizing that the very foundations of his mind had been changed in a space of less than a few seconds.

He was listening to Rek's thoughts, and to Bea-Anna's voice, warning him that he must never say anything that might make Rek suspect he could now read his mind like an open book.

"Yeah," he said, turning to look at Rek. "I can imagine it must have been a shock to you the first time, too."

"Well, let's get down to business," Rek said hastily. "Bea-Anna is going to teach you the science necessary to get her out of this trap she's in. It has a wall of polytron matter that has to be cut open. That stuff's so thick that even steel is like a gas compared to it. But she says there's a way to cut it open, and she'll tell you how. Then you're to tell me, and I'll get the equipment. Is that clear? No funny stuff, or you'll be in trouble."

"It's clear," Dave said.

* * *

"Damn woman," Zaney said. "Never saw one yet that wasn't treacherous."

Rek looked at Zaney suspiciously.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing," Zaney said, his eyes shifting nervously to Dave.

"Come on," Rek said, smiling, "you must mean something."

"No," Zaney said. "I just don't like women."

REK LOOKED at two of his men and dipped his head imperceptibly. They promptly bore Zaney to the deck and took off his helmet, while other guards stood ready to jump on Dave or Bill if either showed any signs of objecting.

With Zaney's helmet off, the two men lifted him to his feet. Rek walked up to him and stood, legs apart, a wide smile on his face.

"One last chance," he said softly.

Zaney licked his lips nervously.

"I was just talking, that's all," he said. "What could I have meant? You're here. You could see everything I did."

Dave, reading Zaney's thoughts, knew that Zaney had made a slip.

Rek reached out a hand and hit Zaney in a way that jolted his head without doing damage.

"Talk," he said.

"Nothin' to talk—" His words were cut short by another vicious, pain inflicting blow.

"Talk," Rek said. He slapped again. "Talk," he repeated monotonously.

Dave took two quick steps and swung Rek around. His fist lashed out, hitting over Rek's heart. Rek's spacesuit took part of the force out of the blow, but he winced.

Rek's men moved toward Dave. Rek waved them back. Then he came toward Dave, his fists lashing out. Both men wore their helmets which protected their faces, but the rest of their bodies were covered only by the flexible suit. Their hands were encased in tough plastic that added to the effectiveness of blows.

Dave sidestepped Rek's charge and sunk his fist in his stomach. Rek grunted and charged again. His fists connected. Dave took three hammer-like blows before he could avoid Rek's fists, then followed Rek and planted a long left into his solar plexus.

Rek turned green. He nodded to

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his men. They grabbed Dave's arms and held him.

Bill started to move in to free Dave. Rek pulled his bazooka pistol and covered Bill.

"Stand back if you want to live," he said. He was panting from the blow Dave had landed.

"Well," Dave said, "I found out I can lick you in a fair fight, anyway, Rek." His tones were gloating, contemptuous.

"We'll see about that later," Rek said. "Right now I'm going to find out what Zaney saw that I didn't." He turned to the two holding Zaney. "Take his suit off."

He waited until they had taken off Zaney's spacesuit. As soon as the dust had been cleaned out of the Astrazomb, tanks of air had been brought over, so that the ship held normal air at fifteen pound pressure, kept fresh by standard air-renewers.

Zaney stared at Rek defiantly.

"You saw something," Rek said. "What was it?"

Dave glanced at the wall. Bea-Anna's giant face was watching, her expression unreadable. He tried to contact her thoughts, but they were shielded.

Rek stepped up to Zaney and doubled his leg, sending his knee into Zaney's groin viciously. Zaney doubled in agony.

"Talk," Rek said. "If you don't I'll keep this up until you do. So talk!"

"All right," Zaney gasped. "I'll talk."

Rek stepped back and waited.

"Bea-Anna pulled a fast one on you," Zaney said haltingly, wincing with pain. "She fixed him so he can read minds like she does. I can read minds a little myself. Always could. I sensed what she was doing."

"Is that all?" Rek exclaimed in relief. "What good will that do him?"

"None—if you say so," Zaney said. "Only it just shows she's trying to turn against you. Why didn't she make it so you could read minds?"

DAVE, WATCHING and listening to this, at the same time was reading Rek's thoughts. He read the suspicion that was growing in spite of Rek's belief that there was no advantage in his being able to read his thoughts.

And suddenly he read a plan and decision in Rek's thoughts. Rek was going to lock him in a separate stateroom and not let him out. He was going to lock each of them up separately, so that there would never again be a chance for all of them to be together.

The feeling of frustration that he had felt on being captured returned. There was no way of escaping Lark Planetoid. There was no way of gaining the upper hand. Unless—

If he could gain the upper hand now—grab Rek's gun, hold Rek as hostage and force his way to freedom. If he could get away and get to Mars and bring back the S.P.'s.

Bea-Anna was reading his thoughts. He could feel the contact with his new mental powers. Her objections flowed into his mind, but with them a fleeting thought that she could make it possible.

He countered her objections, one by one. Still she was doubtful. Then came her agreement.

This exchange of thought had taken place in the space of two heartbeats, while Rek was turning from Zaney to him.

Suddenly Rek jerked. Pain crossed his face. His hand holding the pistol let go of it. He staggered back, his hands going to his heart.

Dave broke away from the hands holding him and dived for the gun as

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it clattered to the metal deck. His fingers closed over it. He went into a role that took him clear of everyone and brought him up against the heavy matter bulkhead.

His eyes blinked into focus. Rek had fallen and was trying to rise. Two of Rek's men had drawn their own pistols and were swinging them toward him. He shot one and snarled for the other to drop his weapon.

Bill was diving toward the other man. His shoulders struck his legs and spoiled his shot. The explosive shell struck the heavy metal wall and spattered deafeningly, but did no harm.

Faster than thought it was over.

Dave was rising carefully, his gun covering Rek's men. Bill was collecting guns and tossing them across the floor to him. And Rek, sitting on the floor, was rubbing the chest of his spacesuit, his face slowly relaxing.

For an instant all movement seemed to stand still. Then a feminine laugh floated into every mind. Through the transparent wall her magnified features were full of mirth. Her laugh was both physical and mental.

"Damn woman," Zaney said bitterly.

"SO YOU HAVE the upper hand," Rek sneered. "What good will that do you? Even if you killed me you couldn't get away. And even if you got away you couldn't stop my men from killing Bea-Anna."

"I have the upper hand in here," Dave said quietly. "That's all that matters right this minute. It's a good thing suit radios won't penetrate outside the hull of the ship, or there'd be more trouble than Bill and I could handle."

"There'll be trouble when we don't come out," Rek said.

"Go jam the airlock, Bill," Dave said. "That'll keep anyone from coming in right away. I need time to think."

"I closed the air valve into the airlock," Bill said when he returned. "The inner door won't open without pressure equalization."

"That fixes that," Dave said grimly. "Now what're we going to do?"

"You have maybe four hours to do something," Rek said, "but you can't do anything."

"Don't think of anything, then," Dave said, grinning. "Remember, I can read your mind now." His grin widened at Rek's thoughts. But suddenly he sensed that there was something Rek was trying not to think of.

"So you do have something in the back of your mind, Rek," he said softly. "I wonder what it is? Try not to think of it."

"Damn you," Rek gritted.

"What could it be?" Dave mocked. "Be sure you don't think of it. The least conscious thought of it and I'll know."

Rek began to think of a poem he had learned once. He repeated it over and over.

"Since there's something you don't want me to know," Dave said slowly, "it must be some way of escape. Say! That's almost a certainty. A smart guy like you would naturally think of the possibility of someday being discovered here. You'd want to have some means of escape if, say, the S.P.'s had that big opening covered from outside. A good sized modern atom bomb could wreck the insides of this planetoid if it got in."

Rek started reciting the poem out loud. Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead.

"A secret tunnel to the surface somewhere?" Dave asked, and from the flash of alarm in Rek's mind he knew he was right. "A secret tunnel," he mused aloud. "Leading to a camouflaged space ship on the surface. A place where you could hide out until

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the S.P.'s were satisfied you weren't here. Maybe months later you could slip away. Now the question is, where do we find the entrance to it?"

"You don't," Rek said. "You're forgetting that you can't get out of this ship without having my men land on you."

"With you as hostage we wouldn't need to worry," Dave said. "You know, that's one thing I like about this, Rek. We aren't getting anywhere, but at least we have you. Whatever happens, we take you with us."

"Take me where?" Rek taunted. "You can't leave this ship with or without me. Even if you did, you couldn't get away without learning where that secret tunnel to the surface is—and getting to it."

Dave studied Rek thoughtfully. In his mind he was probing Rek's thoughts, too. It was a strange feeling to be reading someone else's mind clearly. A plan was forming in his mind, based on what he saw in Rek's makeup.

WHILE BILL watched Rek and his men with a gun, he slipped off his spacesuit. When he stood free he grinned at Rek.

"Your turn," he said. "Take off your suit. Then I'm going to show your men what a coward you are at heart. They can't see into your rotten mind, but I can. I know you're yellow. And you know it too, don't you Rek."

"So you think you can lick me," Rek said. He slipped out of his spacesuit. There was a sly smile on his face. His eyes darted around, noting the positions of his men.

"Aren't you being foolish?" Bill asked. "I can't keep my eyes on the fight and these other guys. Something might happen."

"You'll have to, you and Zaney," Dave said. "We don't have anything to tie them up with. I'm going to pound a little information out of Rek."

"Why don't you torture it out of him?" Zaney said. "He'd torture it out of you and not give you a chance to defend yourself."

"I'm not made that way," Dave said curtly. He waited until Bill and Zaney herded the other captives over into one corner.

Rek came at him slowly. Dave saw from the way Rek advanced that it would be no easy thing to beat him. He moved like a man with plenty of ring experience.

Rek feinted, trying to maneuver Dave around so he could drive him toward Bill and interfere with Bill's coverage of his men with his gun. But Dave stopped this with quick, short jabs to the face. When he stepped back, dancing, Rek's nose was beginning to bleed.

He felt better. Rek, though slightly heavier, was slow. He signaled his punches. Or did he? Dave began to realize that his telepathic powers were giving him a distinct advantage. He could sense what Rek was going to do before he did it.

Rek backed away slowly. Dave followed warily, then darted in. When he moved back Rek's left eye was puffing up. He darted in again with two sharp, painful blows to the side of Rek's face, and took a wild blow against his ear in getting away.

Rek had forgotten his plan to use the fight to make an opening for his men to overpower Bill and Zaney and get the guns back. It was taking all his attention to hold his own.

Dave kept it that way, never staying away from Rek long enough for the man to think and plan. Little by little he felt the strength leave Rek's blows. He placed his own hits, concentrating on Rek's left eye and the side

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of his face, hitting the same spots time after time until they were raw and bleeding.

Rek was trying to grapple with him now. Dave slipped away each time, realizing that his lack of experience in wrestling would leave him at a disadvantage.

Rek knew he was licked. His plan to drive Dave against Bill drove him to one last frenzied charge, head down. Dave met it with his knee. Rek dropped to the deck.

"Where's the entrance to that secret tunnel?" Dave demanded.

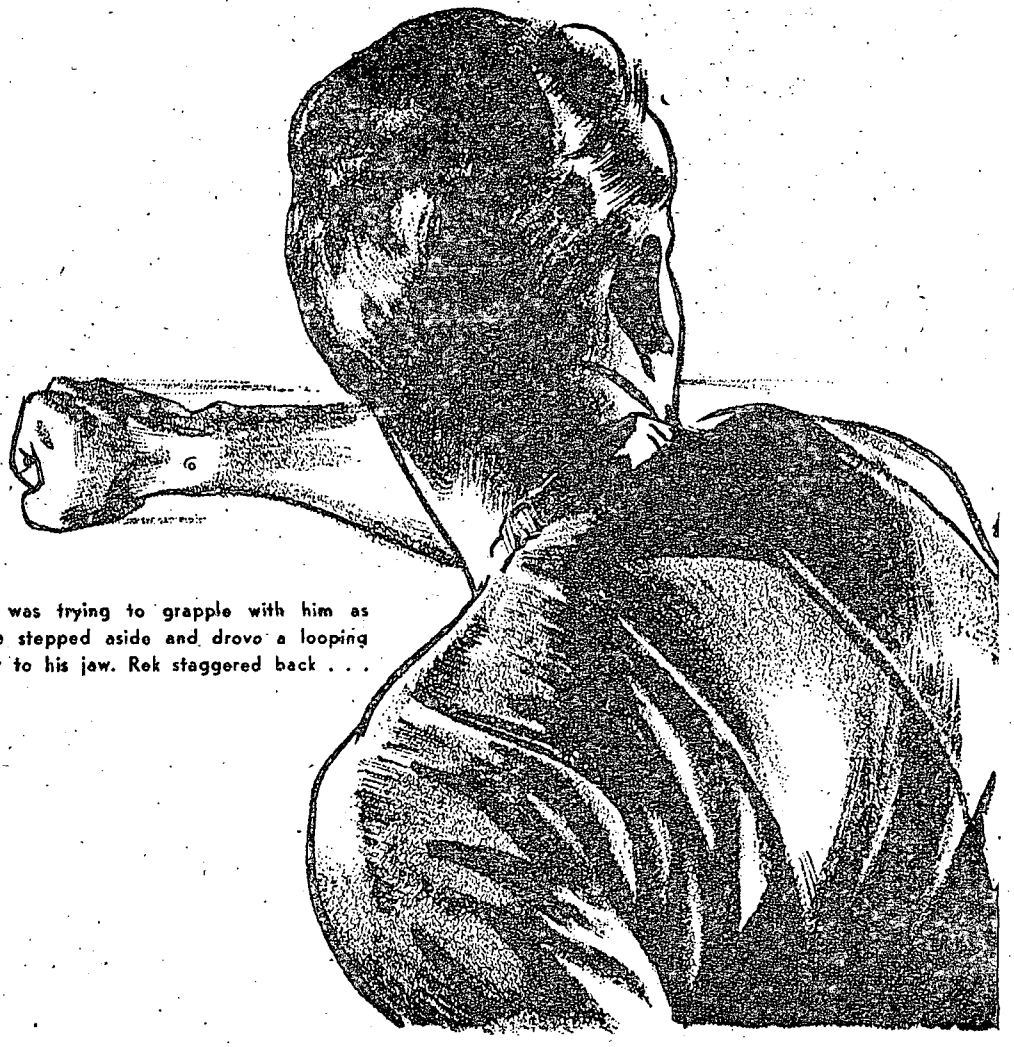
Against his will Rek thought of its location.

"So it's underneath the space ship you use as headquarters," Dave said. "All right. Get up and put on your spacesuit. You're going with us. The rest of you are staying here."

He laid their spacesuits in a row, and getting down flat, sent a shot that went through all of them, leaving a gaping hole in each one.

Now he looked through the transparent wall at the magnified head of Bea-Anna.

"You will be all right," he tele-



Rek was trying to grapple with him as Dave stepped aside and drove a looping blow to his jaw. Rek staggered back . . .

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pathed. "They can't get to you in your shell, and we'll be back with help in less than a month."

She smiled at him, but didn't reply. Then the wall changed, its atoms shifting, and it was again a blank gray wall.

Dave frowned, feeling slightly uneasy. Was something wrong? He shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing else that could be done. If he got away he would be back and the S.P.'s would help him free her. If he didn't get away, Rek would be killed with him. No one could get to Bea-Anna unless she showed them how to cut through the heavy matter wall.

"JUST A MINUTE before you put your helmet on," Dave said. He took Rek's helmet and ripped out the microphone wires. "That's so you can't call for help."

Rek looked at him through one, hate filled eye. The other was puffed closed. His nose had stopped bleeding, but blood smeared his mouth and chin.

"Get it on," Dave said, "I don't like to look at you." He put a shocked expression on his face at what Rek was thinking.

Five minutes were wasted in ripping belts off the damaged suits to tie Rek's arms to his sides and make a sling around him that could be held onto to carry him along when they left the ship. Then they were ready.

Dave looked at his three companions. Bill's face was pale. Zaney was his usual sour-faced self, to all appearances. Rek was sulking. Dave turned to Rek's men.

"Stay in this compartment until we leave," he ordered. "If any of you try to follow us to the airlock I'll shoot to kill, and stay out of the line of fire through the corridor, because just before I close the airlock door I'm going to send a shot this way to make sure none of you sneak up and try to gum up the airlock machinery."

He read in their minds that they would stay where they were. They had the spaceman's feeling of being helpless around danger without a spacesuit to put on.

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At the airlock Bill turned on the valve he had shut off. He stepped back with Rek Barker in tow. Dave and Zaney stood with bazooka pistols ready as the door of the airlock opened, in case there was someone in it. It was empty.

"I don't think we'll have any trouble," Dave said. "It's too soon for anyone to be curious about what's gone on in here." He searched Rek's thoughts for a sign of something that might spell danger, but could find only thoughts of Rek's feeling of defeat.

"It would be almost too good to be true if we could get away and back to Mars without more trouble," Bill said.

The outer door of the airlock opened. Before them was the immensity of space of the interior of Lark Planetoid, utterly soundless, almost totally black, and without sign of movement.

Dave stepped out. His shoes gripped the durosteel surface around the airlock with just enough force to hold him. Bill came out with Rek in tow. Zaney followed.

"Back the way we came," Dave said casually. "Only, when we get there we miss the platform and go under the ship."

Bill picked Rek up and leaped into the air. Dave followed and grabbed onto the belts fastened around Rek. Zaney got the idea and did the same.

As they drifted up from the ship they found Rek's headquarters ship and shot their rocket pistols behind them to drive toward it.

As they neared it three figures took off from its platform. They were undoubtedly seen, but none of the three saw anything to make them curious.

They drifted under the huge ship, used their hands to cushion their fall against the rock surface, and landed on their feet on the undershell of the ship.

Almost immediately they saw the gaping hole. If they had not known it led to the outer surface they would never have suspected it. As they entered it and propelled themselves along whenever they were close enough to the sides to touch them, they saw no sign of man's touch. It was a freak pipestem in solid rock.

They were in total darkness now, but such is the spaceman's instinct that they felt no fear, and seemed to sense the walls about them.

Dave kept one corner of his mind on Rek's thoughts. If there were any danger or any trap along the way, it was certain Rek would be unable to keep from thinking of it.

The pipestem tunnel wandered erratically. Mile after mile they went, slowly and carefully, with only an occasional jarring bump against the walls.

And at last they came to the cave-like space where a ship lay.

Starlight filtered in from above through cracks in the camouflage covering over the ship. And here, for the first time, were signs of work done on the tunnel. The walls showed the marks of drilling tools. The cavity in the surface of the planetoid had been enlarged to hold the ship.

It stood there, stern down, ready for flight. Its drive rockets were slightly larger than standard. It was a special built job designed for accelerations at the very limits of the body's endurance.

"No use wasting any time," Zaney said, practically. "Let's get going."

"Should we turn Rek loose now?" Bill asked. "We don't want to take him along with us, do we?"

"Certainly we take him with us," Dave said. "We're turning him over to the S.P.'s. What made you say a thing like that?"

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"I don't know," Bill said. "It was a silly idea, wasn't it. Come to think of it, it had a feeling like maybe Bea-Anna put it in my mind."

"Nonsense," Dave said. "Come on. Let's get in the ship and blast off."

"NO SIGN OF the planetoid, sir," the crisp voice spoke through the loudspeaker.

"Keep looking," Major Tryon said, his finger flicking the intercom switch.

Dave, Bill, and Zaney watched the huge radar screen intently, anxious to get a first glimpse of Lark Planetoid as it came within range.

It was five weeks since they had blasted off in Rek's getaway ship and gone to Mars to get help. Now they were in the ship's office of the lead ship. Nineteen other battleships were spread out on either side of the one they were in.

They carried enough power to blast Lark Planetoid out of existence. Nestled in launching tubes were counter robombs, ready to be launched and stop any robomb that might be sent out by the defenders of the pirate base.

A small dot appeared in the radar screen. Immediately the loudspeaker came to life again.

"That new dot is a small spaceship, sir," it said. "It's in a slow spin, indicating no one on board."

"That must be Zaney's ship," Dave said quickly. "We set it in an orbit to follow the planetoid."

"Does the position of that ship check with the planetoid orbit data?" Major Tryon spoke into the intercom.

"Yes, sir," came the answer. "Half a million miles behind the predicted position of the planetoid; but the planetoid itself definitely isn't where it should be, nor within range of our radar or telescopes."

"That's funny," Major Tryon said, turning away from the intercom. "A planetoid can't just up and vanish, and it certainly can't be moved out of its course like a common ship. Are you sure you had that orbit data right, Mr. Armet?"

"Positive," Dave replied. "I can't understand it."

"I wonder," Major Tryon said. He returned to the intercom and dialed. "Have the prisoner brought to the office," he said.

A few minutes later Rek Barker, handcuffed, was brought in.

"Your Lark Planetoid isn't in its orbit," Major Tryon said. "Had you set up any drive rockets on it to take it out of its orbit, Mr. Barker?"

"No!" Rek said in surprise. "I never thought of it."

"Have you any possible explanation of its not being in its orbit?" the Major asked.

"No, unless—" Rek stopped.

But Dave had read his thought. It was one that was in his own mind.

"Unless what?" Major Tryon asked.

"Bea-Anna," Rek said. "There's no telling what secrets she had up her sleeve. I can tell you this: if Lark Planetoid's off its course, she's the only one who could be behind it."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," the Major said. Then, to the guards, "Take him back to his quarters."

When Rek had been taken away Major Tryon turned to Dave.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Can you imagine how she might have worked it? Or why?"

"I don't know," Dave said uncomfortably.

"Damn woman," Zaney spoke up. "Never can tell what they'll be up to next. But you can't tell me she wasn't able to move her ship wherever and whenever she wanted to, even though she was a prisoner in it."

"What makes you think so?" the

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Major asked thoughtfully.

"Well," Zaney said, stroking his chin thoughtfully, "take when I first landed on her ship, for example. It was right in the regular prospecting lanes. Take the orbit she was in. It would pass within half a million miles of Mars itself every few years. She'd have been discovered long before this if she had been in that orbit long. And if she wasn't in it long, how'd she get in it in the first place unless she could direct her ship some way? And if she's from outer space like I think she is, how could she get into a stable orbit that's almost circular, unless she could control her ship?"

"I think you're right," Major Tryon said. "Well, she can't have gone far with the planetoid in five weeks. I'll order a sweep maneuver back along the orbit and see if we can find out what happened."

IT WAS TWO weeks later. Dave, Bill, Zaney, and Major Tryon were again in the ship's office. The fleet was spread out in an advancing line ten million miles long, it's radar screens combing everything within range.

"Not a sign," Major Tryon said. "If it wasn't for Rek Barker's confession and the checking we did, I'd think you were all pulling a crazy hoax. A planetoid thirty miles in diameter, even if it is hollow, can't be driven off its course by the power in a hundred spaceships. But where is it? There's not even a trace of rocket gases sufficient to account for it being driven through any reasonable acceleration."

"I—I've been thinking, Major," Dave said. "I examined the pitting on the durosteel shell of that ship—"

"Ah!" Major Tryon exclaimed. "That's what's been tantalizing me in the back of my mind. Go on."

"When I looked at it," Dave said, "it looked to me just like metal that's had electric arcing against it in a vacuum. There couldn't be anything else that would pit metal that way. It made me wonder if maybe sometime in its travels that ship hadn't been in some freak electrical storm in space—though I don't see how such a thing could be possible."

"It might be," the Major said. "It might have been in some huge gas area sometime. It's conceivable that there might be electric discharge under those conditions."

"But now," Dave went on. "I'm beginning to wonder if maybe that pitting wasn't connected with whatever drives that ship. It had no rocket tubes. Whatever drives it must be a force, rather than rocket recoil. Such a force might cause a flow of electricity through the ship that would cause a discharge that would pit the shell in time. And—"

Dave stopped, an embarrassed look on his face.

"And she was acting like she might be giving him the brushoff when we left," Zaney said, cackling. "I didn't miss that. She didn't like the idea of us going for help. She shut her wall right in Dave's face."

Major Tryon studied Dave's expression.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat loudly. "It seems safe to assume that this Bea-Anna had some way of moving her ship and the planetoid out of the orbit they were in. It seems obvious. We've got to work from there. Where would she be most likely to head for? Probably outer space."

"Probably," Dave said, his voice flat and dispirited.

"Dave's been jilted. His heart's broken," Zaney said, chuckling gleefully.

"And you've lost enough in your cut from the salvage at Rek's base to drink yourself to death," Dave

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said, trying hard to smile.

"It means more than that," Major Tryon said. "That drive principle she uses would save us countless billions of dollars annually if we could get it, and maybe even make it possible for us to colonize the outer planets. That's what I'm interested in.

"We'll have to try to find her. But we haven't enough rocket fuel to go out far. I'll order the ships in and put most of the fuel on five of the ships and send the others back."

MAJOR TRYON stood watching the radar screen idly. Three months had passed since he filled his fuel tanks from the reserves of other ships, and, with four other ships, started on the journey along the most probable escape trajectory from the spot where Bea-Anna must have started.

Dave sat in a chair, also watching the screen. Bill and Zaney were asleep in their chairs.

"Still no sign," Major Tryon said tiredly. "We're going to have to give up. We have barely enough fuel to reverse our speed and return to Mars. One thing," he said, grinning wryly. "We've gone farther from the Sun than any other person."

Dave didn't answer. His eyes were open, but in his mind he was reaching out, searching, calling. He had been doing that constantly since he first knew that the planetoid was gone.

More than once he had felt that Bea-Anna was aware of his searching thoughts. But if she were she didn't answer. Why? That was all he wanted to know. If she wanted to go on in space, drifting, she had that right. But why couldn't or wouldn't she at least have the good grace to say, "No Dave. You're not for me. Goodbye."

He wanted at least that.

He had felt from the start that Major Tryon's ships wouldn't be able to catch Bea-Anna unless she wanted them to, and she didn't.

He felt that from her prison she could command unknown forces that would move more than a mere planetoid. And if she could, that answered far more questions than it created.

She could have driven her ship to Mars or Earth and landed, and had the resources of the entire human race at her disposal to get free. Instead, she had called only he and Bill, Zaney Smith, and Rek Barker.

What about the hundreds of people still left in Lark Planetoid when she shot it off its course toward outer space? They couldn't get back now. They were at her mercy.

Would she wait until the Solar System was far behind, and then show them how to release her?

Where had she come from, and how long ago? Why was she imprisoned? What super science had built that shell that imprisoned her?

Questions! He sighed deeply and started to open his eyes. But suddenly a tendril of thought touched him, faded, then became stronger. It was like the kiss of an ordinary woman, the breath of a breeze on a grassy meadow. It was she!

And as abruptly she was gone. There was left in his mind only—

He opened his eyes. With shaking fingers he went to the table on which the intercom rested and wrote the figures on the scratch pad there.

Major Tryon watched him, a puzzled frown creasing his forehead.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Bea-Anna's trajectory toward free space," Dave said, his voice shaking. "She just told me by telepathy."

"Tell her to turn back," the Major said.

"I can't," Dave said. "She won't listen to me."

Major Tryon dialed the intercom.

"Feed this data into the autopilot

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and see if we can make it," he said, reading off the figures.

THE VOICE at the other end repeated the figures. There was silence for almost two minutes.

"Sorry, sir," the voice erupted. "We'd never make it and have fuel left to prevent total escape from the System."

"Well," Major Tryon said, hanging up and smiling sadly. "That's that. Too bad."

"How about the life ships?" Dave asked. "Couldn't we get back in them?"

"And sacrifice a billion dollars worth of ships?" the Major asked. "I wouldn't dare come back at all!"

"How about taking on fuel from the other four ships so this one can go on?" Dave asked. "We've GOT to go on."

"Sorry," the Major said. "We can't imperil the other ships by taking their last ounce of reserve."

Dave stared at him, misery welling into his eyes.

"Sorry," the Major said gruffly, turning away. "I may as well give the order to return to Mars now."

"But you can't!" Dave said bitterly. "Why—we know right where she is now."

Major Tryon turned his shoulder and lifted the intercom microphone and started to dial.

"Wait," Dave said, taking his arm. "Suppose I took one of the life ships. Could I make it, going on alone?"

"That would be suicide," the Major said, his voice sympathetic. "Even if you got there you'd never be able to get back."

"I don't care," Dave said. "I want to go."

"You're crazy, Dave," Bill said sharply. "What good would it do you. You're in love with Bea-Anna. Sure. But what good would it do you to go after her? You couldn't do anything but stand outside that wall and look at her."

"Even that is better than going back without her," Dave said. "I'm going."

"I think I have something to say about that," Major Tryon said. "I can't allow it."

"Now, Major," Zaney Smith said mildly. "You wouldn't deny a man the privilege of going after his girl friend, would you?"

He stood up and stretched lazily, his eyes twinkling.

"Sorry," Major Tryon said firmly. "It's out of the question. If I did it I'd be demoted. Regulations wouldn't allow it. To let one life ship go unnecessarily would endanger part of the crew, because there wouldn't be enough life ships left to carry the rest of the crew safely. Sor—"

His last word was clipped short by Zaney's bony fist as it connected with his jaw.

"Come on Davey," Zaney said excitedly. "We can make it before they stop us."

"We?" Dave asked wonderingly.

"Sure," Zaney said. "Didn't think I'd stay behind, did you? How about you, Bill? Comin'?"

"Not me, Zaney," Bill said. "But I'll see that the Major doesn't wake up until you're gone."

"Good for you, Bill," Zaney said. "Come on, Davey."

He took Dave's hand and dragged him toward the door.

"Wait a minute," he said rushing back and tearing off the sheet containing the figures Dave had written down. "Almost forgot the figures."

In the corridor Zaney and Dave slowed to a casual stroll. No one was suspicious, since no alarm had been sounded yet.

Life ship drill had been pounded into

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them eternally. They knew just what to do to board one and leave the huge battleship in it.

In moments they were inside the fifty-foot, five-man ship. It was Zaney who tripped the release button that freed the ship and opened the hull to let it escape.

Automatically the radar screen came to life, revealing the long silver hull of the giant battle cruiser alongside.

Zaney fed the figures off the scratchpaper into the autopilot. The rockets came to life, pressing Zaney and Dave back in their cushioned seats.

"Well, we're off, Davey," Zaney said cheerfully. He looked into the radar screen at the retreating battleship. There was a tear of regret in his old, gray framed eyes.

"Damn woman," he muttered softly to himself.

THE END

OUT OF THE PAST - - -

★ By H. R. Stanton ★

AS A CIVIL engineer with the Terran Services, I've knocked around quite a bit. I'm not particularly moved by emotion or sentiment. In my game you can't be—not if you want to live long. I've seen sights that would make the average man's blood run cold—sights which have left me unaffected. But there are rare times when even I am touched. I'll never forget, as long as I live, that simple little discovery which Harry Fellen, my co-worker, and I made.

We were doing a routine survey on Venus a few weeks back. It was hard uncomfortable work as all Venusian operations are. Try getting up some enthusiasm in a temperature of a hundred and twenty degrees with a relative humidity of one hundred per cent. Try doing it while you're wearing a spore-suit and a filter mask. It's not exactly fun.

Anyhow we were running this survey, using a small copter, and doing a lot of marking on foot in the heart of the fantastic growths that cover Venus. We'd left the copter at a temporary base and were running a base-line—just the two of us—to be used later in spotting a small rocket port. We had the best equipment—radio and optical, as well as a complete drawing room in the copter—but we were not exactly jumping with vigor. The swamps drain a man too easy.

Harry was walking knee deep in mud toward me. I put down the optical sighter.

"Jim," he said in an unusually earnest tone, "come over here a minute will you?" He stopped and motioned me to follow him.

"O.K." I said, "What do you want."

"Take a look at this."

I followed him for a distance of about three hundred meters. The little walk was fatiguing. Harry was waiting.

"What's up?" I asked rather uncuriously.

He pointed to a clump of vegetation at the base of a gigantic tree. I looked closely but I saw nothing unusual. Here was a huge lump of mossy, undergrowth, crawling alive with typical Venusian spore-growths, in all, an ugly sight.

"I don't see anything," I said after a time.

Harry took his light aluminum shovel and jabbed at the mould-covered pile. It gave a distinctly metallic ring. I looked curiously at Harry. Without a word I joined him and in five minutes we had uncovered a sizable expanse of metal. We were practically floating in our suits after the effort, but this was something!

Harry looked at me and I looked at him. "You know what this is?" he asked in a feeble voice.

"I know," I said slowly, "that's a rocket—and I'll bet credits, it's the *Prometheus!*"

Seventy years ago the first interplanetary rocket to Venus was launched—and it had never been heard of again. The loss hadn't stopped men, but I remember reading accounts of how the event was taken on Earth.

To make a long story short, Harry and I went at it, uncovering enough metal to enable us to make a cut into the badly corroded thing. We saw the remnants of skeletal dust that remained under the thick coating of Venusian life-forms.

Nothing was recognizable, no writings, no notes, no film. Only the etched nameplates told us the name of this incredible adventurer to the planets.

Here, standing on an alien planet, seeing the tragic remains of a glorious undertaking, realizing that we were of the same breed, made me feel prouder then, than ever before.

Well, when the incident was reported, it made quite a stir; they're going to leave the hulk here, and put up a monument to the men who made the last trip. I'm going to be in on the ceremony—not that I'm a sentimentalist you understand—but I want to hold my head just a bit higher...

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The LIVING

by Stanley Mullen

It was Vardee's job to track down the Rad-storm and plot its course — but to do this he must face almost certain death

WEATHER prediction anywhere is something less than an exact science; on Venus, under conditions still imperfectly understood, it is rarely even an educated guess. Storms, especially rad-storms are unpredictable, and Rad-storm Y-318 was more erratic than most. Fresh from training school on earth, with the full responsibility of Field Observation Station 23-16 draped on his youthful, lanky shoulders, Jole Vardee was as unpredictable and erratic as any storm. Senior Observer Halbert, at headquarters, did not know that; he did not even know Vardee—

Junior Weatherman Vardee scrambled from under his blanket shielding and stared in amazement at the banked gauges surrounding him. Unless the instruments were lying, the storm was no longer approaching the lonely weather station. It was not even in the vicinity, and must have veered westward and vanished behind the Targas Mountains. Puzzled and disturbed, Vardee beamed a hurried call to headquarters and the senior observer, which was the first of his fateful mistakes.

The visi-screen buzzed, blurred, cleared, and exploded into a grimacing face from which came angry sounds.

"Lost your storm?" screamed Halbert. "Fantastic! Nobody loses storms. Not in my department."

Vardee assured his senior that a precedent had been set. Then he made his second mistake; he went into lengthy explanations. Y-318 was no ordinary storm; who could have foreseen that it would disdain the schedules charted for it? Ignoring the NE to SW curve as plotted, it had turned at a sharp angle, apparently following the 34th parallel westward into savage country beyond the forbidding range known to the few surviving aborigines as the Holy Mountains. At any rate, the focus was lost and Y-318 had gone beyond the ken of Vardee's instruments. He could offer no suggestion as to its present lo-

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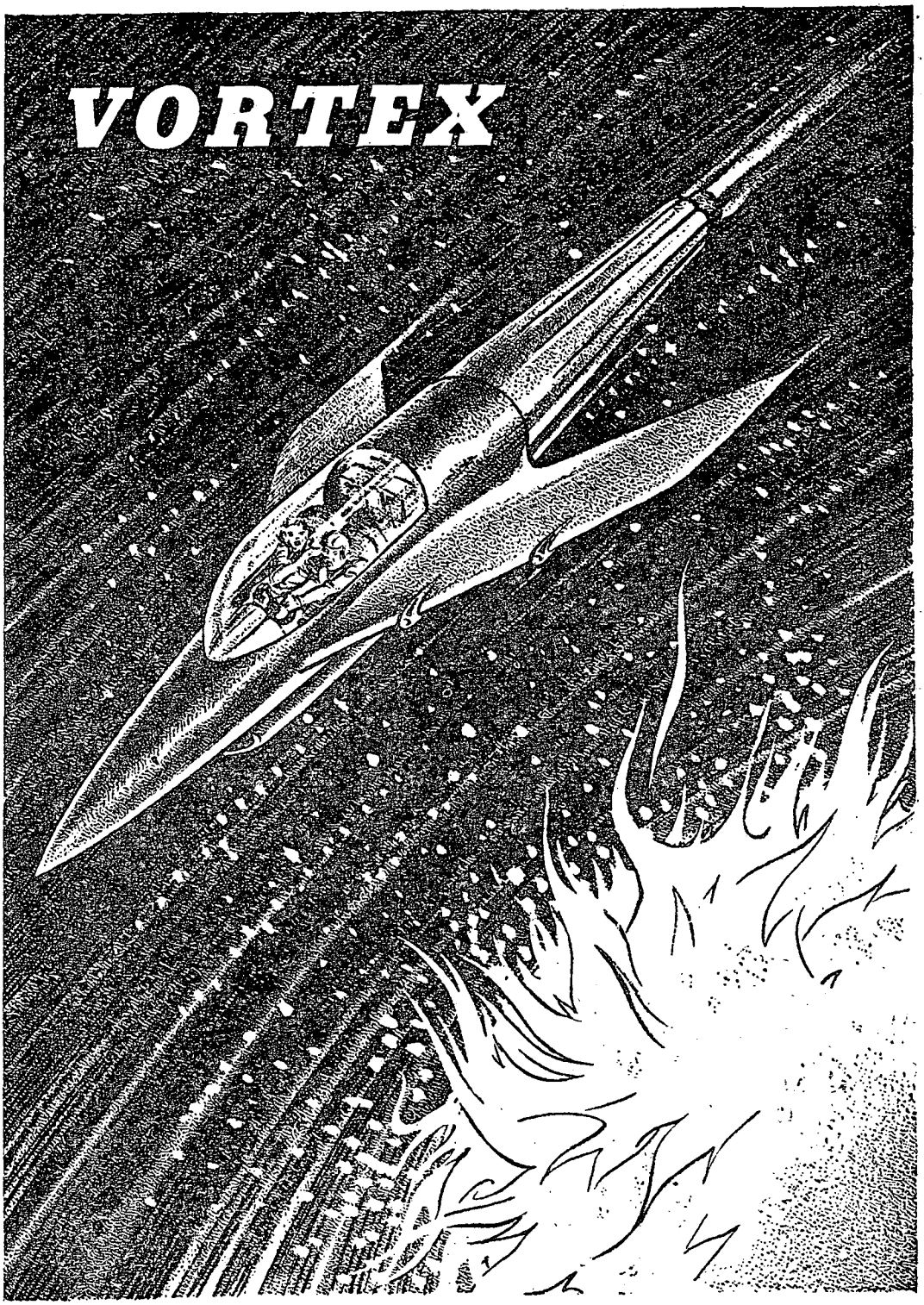

He fought to keep the ship away from the center of the storm — but it whirled closer . . .

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cation, its speed, or its future intentions.

Senior Observer Halbert was allergic to other people's mistakes; the rash might be invisible, but irritation existed and usually vented itself in diabolic wit or vitriolic abuse. The restraint in his tone should have warned Vardee. The voice broke into his explanations.

"New man, aren't you?"

"Three months, earth-count," Vardee admitted unhappily. His tone sounded aggrieved. It seemed outrageous to hold him personally responsible for the vagaries of a travelling vortex of radioactivity.

"If you've lost your storm," Halbert said wrathfully, "you'd better go find it. And don't bother me with reports when you've nothing to report. I'm busy."

Connection broke in a shower of blue sparks which may have been overflowing induction from the SO's overcharged mood.

With mixed emotions, Vardee studied the blank screen. Like many potential heroes, he was troubled by mental after-images of repartee which occurred to him as soon as the opportunity to use it was past. "I wonder if he was kidding me," he mused acridly, "or if I'm supposed to establish a mobile observation base."

The loneliness of his isolated outpost gave him no answer. Setting the panelled instruments on automatic record, he went into the dome-enclosed airlock platform and stared through the ports at the uninviting prospect. Few landscapes are less appealing to an earth-dweller than the barren shores of a sea bed from which all water has long-since vanished. Vardee shrugged and accepted the inevitable.

BULGING suits of protective armor in grotesque semi-human form ranged in racks along the walls like mute sentinels. Their presence emphasized his loneliness. Dubiously, he struggled into a suit and donned the plastic fishbowl helmet with its hideous faceplate mask. Feeling like a space explorer, venturing into the unknown, he entered the airlock valve, closed the inner door and waited for the outer to open automatically. Conviction of his own inadequacy assailed him as he faced the barren, stark beauty of Venus.

Outside the station, wind was blowing at gale velocity. Only a fringe of the disturbance area had come anywhere near the weather station, but that was bad enough. Sand-filled air came in gusty whipcracks, pounding the transparent mask with gritty snarls of sound. Vardee winced and would have ducked instinctively but for the stiff awkwardness of his garments, which made any kind of movement difficult.

Clear of the airlock and away from the main building, he paused for a look around. Earth was never like this. On a low summit in a region of sandflats and gauntly eroded outcroppings, the weather station was garlanded by flowing mantles of luminous dust. Direct sunlight never filtered through the eternal overcast of leaden sky; eery, variable, illumination reflected back to the surface an echoed glare from distant "hotspots" —the sinks of molten radioactive material which gave the waterless Yellow Sea its deceptive name. The planet seemed to exist in a separate universe; stretching overhead was that sinister dome of dust and ionized gases which screens Venus from all view of its parent-sun and sister-worlds.

In the sheds, Vardee made the gesture of tinkering with the atomic motors of a ground-sled used for exploration and survey. He was not too

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happy when the mechanism responded with a smooth, efficient blast of power. There was no possibility of mechanical treachery to aid his decision. It was up to him. Reflecting that the terrors of the now-distant storm were nothing compared to the mystic terrors inspired by the grimacing despot of headquarters, he taxied the "gimmick-scooter" to the doors.

Doors clicked and opened automatically and he was outside, hurtling down a long slope of loose sand in wild, careening rush. Below the runners, sand and bare rock whirled past, sound of their friction lost in speed of motion. In seconds, the sled was down the slope and crossing the flatlands toward a rise of ground which marked the shore-limits of a long-vanished sea. Up the steep went the sled onto a wide bench of soft sand at the foot of towering cliffs and fantastically eroded spires. A shadowy, winding gorge threaded the barrier cliffs and came out above them into another gigantic basin of coppery sand, bounded afar by strange yellow mountains. The Targas Range.

Rockets astern hissed a steady pulse of power as Vardee nosed the sled over wind-carved ridges and dipped into choking sinks of powdery alkali at terrific speed. Banshee wail of overheated runners sliding on abrasive material rose to shrill agonies of sound. Vardee ignored the ominous complaint of metal and concentrated on the barrier of eery mountains ahead. Like an arrow the sled plunged toward them. Twin plumes of sand arched backward from the blunt nose of the craft.

There was a road of sorts, most of it obscured by wind-riffled drifts. At the far end of it, the Targas Mountains lay like bars of minted gold across the visible limits of the world. They were titanic folds of weather-scarred rock, clothed in mosslike carpet of vivid yellow—which was a sacred color to the sparse remnants of native tribes living near them. Holy Mountains! Why, Vardee wondered. Perhaps, because of the color. Perhaps.

BEYOND them was only mystery and the awful Tihar Forest, practically uninhabited, virtually unexplored, an incredible and vast wilderness of fern, fungoid growths and plant forms totally unknown on earth and still unfamiliar to the colonial botanists after three centuries. In there — somewhere — was Vardee's storm. Grimly he sent the sled toward a gap in the hills where the road vanished.

"I'll show *him!*" Vardee promised himself....

In Castarona, by the infamous Yellow Sea—in which there is no water, but only scattered sinks of semi-liquid, faintly radio-active matter—Central Weather Headquarters was operating at slightly less than peak efficiency. A new commissioner was expected momentarily, and like most bureaucracies, the staff was making a heroic effort to appear a well-oiled machine, in the hope of impressing the new overlord. Under pressure, a flood of reports from observation stations began to pile up on the SO's desk. Robot sorting and collating machines operated at breakneck speed, cutting through a mound of code-punched cards and cards impregnated with electronic inks. Everything was in order—except for the long overdue reports from Station 23-16.

Three listening post operators were called on the carpet to account for the non-reception of data before the bottle-neck was tracked down. There

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were no reports. SO Halbert had a sudden premonition of fatality.

"Get hold of that maniac in 23-16 and find out why his reports aren't in," Halbert snapped to an underling.

"The station seems to be functioning properly," defended a puzzled third assistant. "We get through, but the messages are merely acknowledged, recorded and filed by automatic tapes. There is no reply."

"Keep trying."

Fate never balks at dramatic coincidence. At the height of the snarl, Halbert became unpleasantly aware of the presence of a man who must be the newest commissioner. Dyslar Apri was a tall, fair-haired man, muscular, bronzed from sun-exposure, which would preclude an origin on Venus, native or colonial. In spite of the Martian sound of his name, his appearance suggested pure earth-strain. He had arrived suddenly, silently, unannounced, and was observing the tense procedure with curious interest.

"Some difficulty?" asked the new commissioner.

The senior observer managed a vaguely evasive smile. "Not important," he said, with obvious effort to sound convincing. "A minor delay in getting reports from a key station. A new man."

"I see. What seems to be the trouble?"

Halbert squirmed uncomfortably. "I'm not sure. It looks as if our man has abandoned his post and gone star-hunting."

"Without orders? That's a serious matter. New man, eh? And alone in a key post? That's very strange."

SO Halbert was coming to slow boil. "It's quite customary, Sir. 23-16 is an unpleasant station. We always assign new men there...alone. They learn very quickly in such isolated surroundings. No distractions. Besides, none of the older men like to work there. It's too close to the Tihar Forest which makes them uncomfortable."

Commissioner Apri frowned. He sat down, taking over the desk, chair and perquisites of SO Halbert. A hard glitter like breaking ice clouded his eyes. He sank back in the sacred chair and settled himself to explore the situation.

"I don't approve of such practices, Mr. Halbert," he said, fixing a frigid stare on the senior observer. "You'd better find out what's wrong at your station...23-16, or whatever it is. I'll be interested in seeing how you handle the matter."

STRANGLING audibly, Halbert swallowed any reply he may have contemplated. A subordinate appeared, waving an official flimsy.

"We have a record, Sir, that 23-16 put through an emergency call direct to you. Just before the reports stopped coming in."

All eyes turned upon Halbert as the slaves gathered about to enjoy their master's discomfiture.

"Is this true, Mr. Halbert?" asked Commissioner Apri. "If so, you must have some idea what's wrong."

In vain, Halbert sought to avoid that probing gaze.

"Well, yes—in a sense, I do," came out grudgingly. "23-16 did call. Junior Weatherman Vardee wanted to report a minor inefficiency on his part. I was busy and probably short with him. It's barely possible that he misunderstood my orders...."

Apri was merciless. "And what—exactly—were your orders?"

Halbert was sweating. Useless to deny recalling details of that brief conversation. It had been recorded, of course, and a word or gesture from him would bring a complete transcript

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of the unfortunate interchange to his desk. He fumbled thoughts desperately and looked about like a trapped animal for any possible avenue of escape. He yielded.

"23-16 was assigned a rad-storm to follow. Vardee should have kept his instruments focused on that storm and reported its progress and intensity in detail. Because it did not follow a predicted course, he lost contact. I told him to try and re-locate the storm. I suspect that he did just that . . . literally."

The commissioner was silent, scowling.

"We're understaffed here," Halbert excused lamely. "Under extreme pressure. I won't alibi. I grant my responsibility. Even that I was hasty in giving an order, and not explicit. But stationing new assignees to 23-16 is quite customary; it's accepted procedure. It went on before I was in charge, and I think it will continue when I've gone."

"I don't think it will," said Apri, a flicker of naked steel in his eyes. "In the meantime, we have a problem. An inexperienced man is trying to establish a mobile base in country that even your veterans avoid. Get that boy back, Mr. Halbert. Safely. Or I can promise you some unpleasant developments without your having to look for them in the Tihar Forest. . . ."

IN A HIGH pass of the Targas Mountains, Vardee crossed the divide and started down. The road had long since vanished. Most of the terrain was standing on end, and Vardee took whatever route offered, holding his breath as the sled roared down fearful slides of rotten stone, twisting and wrenching at the steering bar, not daring to use the brake-rockets. His speed was something to behold, had there been anyone to behold it. He was alone with clattering echoes in a maze of splintered canyons; the one he followed a mere zigzag crack never intended for the passage of vehicles.

All roads led downward, and Vardee knew that somewhere below the mountains would break away into high plateau country. At least that would provide some level going. He came suddenly on what might once have been a road. Without thinking where it might lead, he followed it. In his mind was room only for the stubborn determination to re-locate the rad-storm, which had now assumed proportions of a personal devil.

The road continued, descending murderous steeps from level to level of the terraced hills. It detoured mighty spills of loose shale and powdery dust studded with boulders, it clung perilously to narrow ledges of rotting cliffside, avoided echoing abysses and traversed shelves of flat rock, only to plunge recklessly down the raw flanks of another mountain. Hours of weary travel brought the man and his sled to the foot of the range.

Ahead was different country, with barren hillsides and deep valleys merging into dense, unbelievable wilderness. The Tihar Forest extended as far as eye could see, a wild, unbroken vastness of extravagant vegetation, unnatural, weird, its fringes reaching dark arms of tangled greenery to enfold the unwary venturer.

It was the first forest Vardee had seen on Venus—and one of the few still existing on what may have been a fair and lovely planet before atomic holocaust. Until that final war, all Venus had been either glittering sun-drenched ocean or savagely luxuriant jungle. But unpredictable chain-reactions had flowed over the surface like

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spreading fire, disintegrating rocks, vaporizing and transmuting the very elements—to leave gaunt and picturesque wasteland, practically waterless, with only the hardiest of mutant plant or animal life surviving at all. Nowadays, most of the world was dry sea-bottom or sered and blasted highlands, but in a few isolated places, such as the high plateau-areas surrounded by sheltering mountain chains, comparatively scant forest remained as mute evidence of vanished splendors.

Even among these, the Tihar Forest was an exception. It was a rioting wonderland of strange and unreal growths, of fantastically eroded volcanic skeletons, of spouting geysers and caves which vomited dry-ice in steaming glaciers. To this spectacular sanctuary had come Nature, outraged by the ultimate violence of man, and here the prodigal goddess had gone creatively insane. In nightmare gardens, warmed and lighted by the flaring peaks, roamed endless varieties of animal and plant mutations, and where Nature's imagination faltered, the mutants themselves improvised.

STRANGE tales born of ignorance and fear had grown up about the Tihar Forest, and most of them were understatements. The forest did not encourage curiosity seekers. It was deadly dangerous, and the few attempts of early earth-colonists to settle on the fringes had met with complete disaster. Exploring parties vanished without trace, swallowed by eloquent silence, after hysterical pleas for help or final messages reporting earthquakes or volcanic outbursts of unparalleled violence. For a time, solitary grull-cat hunters stalked their eery prey, or the cats stalked the hunters, along the outer edges of forest. But trade routes were impossible to maintain, and through the years the ranks of those daring enough to hunt within that terror-haunted highland thinned and practically vanished.

Vardee knew something of this, but very little. Insufficient information and lack of caution are almost as bright an armor as courage and frequently more startling. With the brashness of youth and ignorance, he halted and beamed a laconic message.

"Mobile Unit 23-16. Entering Tihar Forest. Still following orders. Will try re-establish contact with Rad-storm Y-318."

There was no acknowledgment and no reply. Investigation revealed that prolonged jarring had wrecked the sensitive internals of his receiving apparatus.

Sighing, he continued his quest....

A MESSENGER brought the flimsy to SO Halbert. "We've heard from Vardee, sir. Report just came in. We're unable to make any contact with him, but he's sending...."

Halbert read the brief report, digesting it painfully, and passed it to Commissioner Apri without comment.

"I know that Tihar Forest," Apri mused aloud. "When I was a kid, my father apprenticed me to a grull-cat hunter, thinking it might make a man of me. I spent a month on the outer rim of that hell's madhouse. It was enough to make or break anyone. It wasn't that I saw anything, but just thinking about what might be there got me. I never got more than a good shout from the edge of it, but you have to be tough to live even there. I ran away to Mars. That's what your orders have got a greenhorn kid into, Mr. Halbert."

"I didn't—"

The commissioner fixed a chilly

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eye on Halbert and the senior observer lapsed into silence. "We're discussing results, not your intentions. I can only hope he keeps sending."

Halbert wiped his face. "We got a fix on his transmitter. He is actually at the fringe of the forest. Maps are pretty sketchy, but that part's fairly well known. A semi-usable road was kept open until recent landslides made it impassable."

The commissioner said bluntly, "Our friend seems to have found it passable...."

SHADOWY forest-darkness closed about Vardee as the sled slugged its way through massed brush, uprooting oversized fungi and beating tree-ferns aside to force passage. In all directions were blank walls of vegetation. At first, while the growths were sparse and scattered, he made better time than he had dared attempt in his mad descent of the mountains. But the road was in such bad repair that it became only a further obstacle to navigation. He abandoned it and struck off cross-country on his own, trusting to instruments for direction.

Wheels would have buried themselves instantly. Vardee was grateful for the large contact area of broad runners, which sustained the laboring sled upon a springing carpet of greenery. At least this would put less strain on the scarred and battered runners, though progress was slow and became slower by the second as he penetrated the entanglements. Tree-ferns and the mighty banded mushrooms thrust from a thick mat of vines, moss and saw-grass, obscuring vision and threatening to engulf sled and all in green solidity. New barriers arose in knotted complexes of tree-root to balk him. He gave up the attempt and returned to the slash of roadway.

Hiss of runners and muted throb of rocket motors shattered the soundless quiet of the ancient forest. But for these comforting mechanical sounds and the tense awareness of his own breathing, no vibrations stirred the sensitive microphones of his plastic helmet. Vardee felt dreadfully alone.

The stiffness and constriction of his armored suiting galled him, even the fishbowl helmet seemed stifling. He stopped to rest and took the opportunity to try eating food concentrates without removing the helmet and mask. The experiment was not too successful. Depressed and still hungry, he wondered the protective armor were necessary. Away from the "hotspots" of the sea-bottom, there was less danger of fatal burning; the air might be breathable. He tested the atmosphere, for both dust-radiation and lethal compounds of gas. None were apparent, and the risk seemed worthwhile.

Free of the armor and helmet, he finished his meal of food concentrates, which satisfied nutritional needs but left much to be desired emotionally. The canteen water was warm and unpalatable. After a brief rest, he resumed his journey.

Between moments of wrestling with the steering bar and trying to follow the cranky contours of ruined road, Vardee found time to make use of his portable storm registers. Y-318 was still vaguely ahead. Exact focus was impossible with the sled bucking and bumping over an uneasy floor of sponge-moss, but even without instruments he could have guessed at the storm's location. The entire forest was in the grip of a powerful disturbance. Long beards of hanging moss stretched out and pointed toward an invisible center of violence. Tides of wind moved through the trees. Across the dim vault of sky whirled stream-

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ers of luminous dust, to lose themselves behind threshing masses of dark foliage. Isolated trees writhed to uproot themselves and follow the wind.

From a faint whisper against the silence, the crying winds swelled in chromatic curve to vast, billowing turbulence, and as quickly died away. There was no horizon, just arching darkness slashed overhead by a river of lighter shadows indicating the frothing greyness of sky. Distant volcanic activity reflected fitful and unreal light from the churning muck above, and legions of eery, distorted shadows marched in broken ranks among the trees. Substance and shadow merged in symbiotic transmutation, becoming part of each other, indistinguishable.

IN VARDEE, confidence became confusion. The road was worse than difficult to follow. It wandered about and lay in rubble heaps, as if caught in some tortuous indecision of its own. Now various side-roads broke away, with no way of telling which road led where. No signs, no marks of recent travel. None of the roads seemed especially inviting. As nearly as possible, Vardee tried to head directly toward the storm-center. Each choice was pure chance, and chance led him astray.

At one turn-off, his selection proved a feeder road leading to a jungle-reclaimed clearing, in which were innumerable rubble heaps to mark ruined buildings of some long-abandoned plantation. Turning back, he numbly retraced his route back to what he firmly believed was the last fork. Perhaps it was, but it led nowhere. He found himself involved in a maze of intersecting roads which turned upon themselves and wavered in ultimate confusion. This was the boundary of man's futile attempt to settle and conquer the Tihar wilderness. Vardee knew that no roads led where he must go, none penetrated the heart of this fastness into which his storm had vanished.

Abandoning hope of easy passage, he struck off blindly by instrument toward the storm.

If the going had been rough before, it was infinitely more so now. Trees closed ranks before him, patches of swamp fouled the runners with clinging mud and entangling vines, outcroppings of jagged rock forced detours. Ground dipped steadily as if he descended into an immense sinkhole. Progress slowed into a series of alternating halts and brief thrusts forward. It was a region of potholes and Vardee had to watch carefully to avoid treacherous sloughs of boiling mud. Without warning, a tremendous geyser spouted close at hand, then relaxed into throaty gurglings as torrents of unpleasantly hot water deluged the vicinity and dripped from the foliage of surrounding trees.

It was fertile ground, and with so much water, vegetation ran riot; joint trunks sprang from blocks of gnarled roots and ran hundreds of feet into the air before branching out and knotting themselves into solid masses, like a second floor. No light penetrated from the ugly greyness of the sky into these titanic arches, but a curious glare permeated the ghostly aisles as if the air itself were faintly luminous. Layers of mist hung at oddly regular intervals above the ground, and over the patches of dreary bog moved phantoms of radiance.

In such a place, the sled had reached the limits of its endurance. It flung itself at a matted tangle of vines, roots and brush which did not give way. Blasting echoes played hide and seek among the great trees as the

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rockets labored in vain. The sled had reached an impassable barrier. It wedged fast and died. Vardee worked over the motors, but there was no response. He got out and looked around.

HE WOULD be lucky if he could make his way back out. There was no hope of travelling afoot with instruments necessary to plot a storm course. He shrugged unhappily, but the decision was out of his hands. He had tried.

Wind was rising again. It shrieked around the treetops but only the sound reached the forest floor.

Tinkering with the transmitter, he beamed off what he suspected was his final message.

"Regret unable to complete assignment. Forest impassable in vehicle. Abandoning sled. Will try to keep in communication."

He glanced upward and was startled to see a geometrical form of intense light against the lower branches of a distant tree. A window, here! Impossible. It must be an accidental reflection. There could be nothing as sane and homelike as a window.

Going closer, he investigated. A dwelling of some kind—plastic prefab, like a hunter's shelter—had been built into the lower branches of a towering forest monster which looked like the grand-daddy of all *gunyab* trees. There was a window, with a light inside, and a telescoping hollow steel ladder which reached to the soggy ground.

Surely rad-storm warnings had gone out. Not even anyone crazy enough to hunt grull-cats would remain in such isolation after a rad-storm warning. The hunter must not have received warning. Few of the hunters carried protective armor, and without it, the man was as good as dead. Possibly he was already sick or disabled. The idea of further complicating his difficulty was almost too much for Vardee. Dubious of his ability to help, he stared up at the shelter. At least he could warn the occupant. He ascended the ladder....

IN HEADQUARTERS, Commissioner Apri returned the latest of Mobile Unit 23-16's communications to SO Halbert. The senior observer ground his teeth and said, "That lunatic! Deep in the Tihar Forest, without even a sled, and he says he'll try to keep in communication with us. If he survives this, I'll take the greatest of pleasure in wringing his neck. Personally."

"I'm beginning to like that boy," Apri admitted, with the suspicion of a tired smile. "He may not know what he's doing, but he's certainly doing it."

Halbert was grimly silent, wondering what would happen next—if the messages would trail off into mute disaster, or if the almost inevitable call for help would come through. If the latter, he knew that he would face the choice of wasting lives in a futile rescue expedition, or of abandoning a green man who was in the difficulty only through a too-literal interpretation of duty and misunderstood orders.

"I won't risk any more lives," he said.

"I wasn't thinking of a ground expedition," Commissioner Apri went on thoughtfully. "That would have been the only hope a few years ago, but my daughter suggested something to me recently. She is quite a character. We were in a hot argument about the Tihar Forest and the best way to hunt grull-cats. As you know, nobody ever got beyond that fringe and came back to tell about it; the inner forest is impassable to sleds and practically

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that afoot. My daughter, Marta, suggested that a really clever hunter nowadays would use a helicopter. Her ideas were pretty ingenious at that: snaring the cats from the air by dropped nets on automatic reels. If a landing were necessary, a small floor of thin metal slats could be trailed behind the copter and set down on the upper foliage which is solidly interwoven and would sustain quite a bit of weight."

Halbert grunted and shook his head. "No good, chief. It's a good idea and might work out...ordinarily. But a copter flying in the disturbed area near a rad-storm would stand about as much chance as a snowball in Hell."

Apri shrugged. "You're probably right. It was just an idea. I must remember to warn Marta about those rad-storms, though. She's just Amazon enough to try her scheme sometime. Quite a girl, always up to something the minute my back's turned. Never misses a chance to demonstrate the superiority of her sex. Resents anything a man has ever done that she hasn't had a chance to try. The fact that I ever hunted grull-cats galls her. I suspect she wants to show me up by bringing a cat back alive."

"You'd better send her to some nice safe place like Mars," Halbert advised.

Weariness showed in the lines of Apri's face. "I haven't tried telling her what to do since she was fourteen. Last time I attempted to spank her, she used judo on me...."

Vardee stood on the tiny platform of the tree-house. The outer door of the airlock valve was closed, which probably meant that the inner one was open and the owner of the place at home. Vardee banged on the metal-sheet door and called out. There was no answer, only a vague shuffling within. He tried again, louder.

THIS TIME the reply was definite, startling. A heavy body thudded against the door, the sound followed by rasping of claws on metal and bestial snarling. A third knock only increased the tempo of furious clawing. Something like a strangled human voice was faintly audible above the uproar of vicious animal sounds.

Now the voice came clearer. A human being, apparently in some distress. Unable to answer the door summons. Probably at the mercy of savage beasts. Perhaps in the final extremities of suffering.

It was no time for niceties. Vardee had never used his service blaster-gun. He fumbled it out awkwardly and pressed the button. The door mechanism flared with sudden heat. Invisible hasps melted and flowed. With a whirring hiss, the door slid open.

From the brilliantly lighted interior came a bounding furry horror. A cat, large as an earth-tiger, moved in blue-silver blur. The gun went spinning from Vardee's hand. He went down before the sudden assault. Fortunately his clothing was tough leather which protected him from the slashing fangs and murderous claws. With gloved hands he fended the vicious beast from his face and throat. Locked together, man and beast rolled to the edge of the platform...and over.

There was a sickening moment of fall. Vardee caught desperately at the ladder-rungs. His fingers closed on one. It gave, bent, but held.

Shock separated the combatants. The grull-cat fell, bounced against the ladder and clung for a moment before leaping gracefully to a near branch. It poised there, regarding him balefully from eyes of palest gold.

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Unfamiliar as he was with the fauna of Venus, Vardee knew a grull-cat when he saw one. This was a half-grown cub, but as large and strong as anything he had ever seen in a cage, its thick satiny fur marked with the faintest traces of black stripes. Aware of deadly peril, Vardee braced himself for renewal of the murderous attack.

Balanced on the swaying limb, the cat gathered itself to feint a spring, then yawned. With deliberate contempt, it turned away and made off along the branch with the conscious artistry of a ballet performer. Like a thickening of shadows, it blended with the clotted foliage and became invisible.

A sound above startled Vardee. He threw a hasty glance to the platform and caught his breath. Framed in the doorway was a vision.

She was tall, bronzed, very beautiful and very wet. Hair of the same silvery blue as the grull-cat's fell in a dripping sheaf on naked, shapely shoulders. Inadequately clad, in hurriedly draped blanket, few of her more than adequate charms were in any way concealed. If anything—

"Can't a girl take a bath?" she said irritably.

Vardee's first thought was that he was very tired, dirty and unshaved. His second was that hardships and exhaustion had driven his mind into the shaky refuge of a dream world. She belonged in his dream-world; he recognized her immediately. But she would not stay there. Her voice, brittle, incisive, angry, was not part of the dream. She should have purred.

"Imbecile," she said with feeling, extending a hand to help him to the platform. "You've let my grull-cat escape."

VARDEE said nothing, just looked. She let him look without coloring, without comment, then turned and stalked inside. Both valve doors of the airlock were open. Vardee followed.

The girl spun around, pale fury in her exquisite features.

"My father sent you," she snapped.

Vardee found his tongue. "Your father, I don't even know your father. Who are you, what are you doing here?"

"I'm Marta Apri, as if you didn't know. And don't lie to me; I know he sent you." She gestured toward his sweaty and mud-grimed uniform, with its embroidered insignia denoting Weather Control. "He's your boss, isn't he?"

"I wouldn't know," Vardee said sadly, shaking his head. "I'm just a dog-robber. Under orders. There's a rad-storm in this area. I don't know how you got here, or what you're doing. But you've got to leave immediately. Didn't you receive the official warning?"

Marta Apri's eyes narrowed. "I don't believe you. If there were a storm, you'd be safely indoors, dodging it with the rest of them. Besides, they'd never send a puppy like you for me. You're not old enough to be wandering around alone. This is just a trick of my father's. I know him. Run along, little boy. Tend to some other errands...someplace else. I've enough to do re-capturing that pet of mine; without having to wipe your nose."

Vardee's eyes flashed anger. He was older than he looked, and sensitive about it anyhow. "I don't know who you are and I don't care," he sputtered. "Under threat of rad-storm, weather control men have full emergency authority. You can check by visiphone about the storm. Whether you do or not, I'm taking you out of here. By force, if I have to."

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Her scornful laughter stabbed his vanity. "I'd like to see you try...."

One sweep of a muscular arm swept Vardee aside. Marta Apri moved toward the door. He lunged at her. She tried judo, but he unwound like a steel spring. Taken by surprise, the Diana of the Tihar Forest was at momentary disadvantage. They struggled. She fought with every animal resource, biting, kicking, scratching—but Vardee was stronger than he looked. Catching her wrist, he twisted, forced her across his knee and spanked the exposed anatomy with workmanlike thoroughness.

"You—monster!" she screamed. "I'll tell my father."

"I'll tell him myself," Vardee panted, "if I ever meet him. If he hadn't neglected this duty, you wouldn't be such a spoiled, headstrong brat. I haven't time to argue with you."

Dispassionately, he set her on her feet. She eyed him warily, as if speculating what punishment would match the outrage. "If my father doesn't send you to the salt mines, I'll kill you for that," she promised angrily. "Bodily violence—"

"You can add kidnapping," Vardee suggested. "Get some clothes on. Unless you want me to dress you. How did you come in?"

"By copter. The ladder goes up at the back of the house. It won't do you any good. The landing gear is damaged. My father—"

"Damn your father," Vardee exploded. "I'll see to the copter. We're taking off. I'll worry about landing later. Better be ready when I get back."

The girl started a reply, thought better of it. With a haughty toss of her head, she stormed from the room.

BRAIN WHIRLING, Vardee made his way to the rear of the tree-hut and ascended a slender ladder leading to the improvised copter landing. The ship was damaged, one skid bent almost to the point of fracture, but it would not prohibit a careful take-off. Inside the tiny cabin, he explored the apparatus for sending and receiving beam messages or broadcasts. The transmitter was perfect, but the receiver was in hopeless condition; damaged curiously, as if some agency had deliberately smashed the equipment to prevent messages coming through. Vardee was puzzled.

He snatched time to beam another report to headquarters.

When he returned to the tree-house, the girl was gone.

Descending to the forest floor, he found her tracks easily enough; the springing, elastic grasses showed signs of recent and rapid movement. Swearing, Vardee plunged into the tangled thickets to search for the huntress who seemed so reluctant to be rescued. Perhaps he had used the wrong tactics in dealing with her; Marta Apri seemed a stubborn woman. But Vardee had a fatal impression that arguments and persuasion would have had no effect.

Her tracks were clear, unmistakable. Panting with exertion, he followed her at a half-run. Time was deadly important.

Across a natural clearing, he sighted her. A flash of vagrant light upon a moving surface of leather. Beside her, weaving and snarling, was the captured grull-cat, about its neck a metal collar, from which a chain ran to her hand.

The cat lunged back and forth, coming up short as the chain ran out. Marta cuffed the hideously fanged jaws, in a gesture half dis-

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cipline, half affection.

Leaving her trail, which circled the open space, Vardee made a short cut. She heard the threshing of brush. As he came into the open, her eyes widened in startled horror.

"Not that way, you fool!" she screamed.

The horror in her eyes stopped Vardee. He turned, looked up. Towering above him, swaying on a slender stem, was a gigantic flower, much like the insect-eating plants of earth. It dipped, and the monstrous, bloated blossom opened like a scoop shovel. Swooping at him, too swift for sight, petal jaws knocked him from his feet and closed over him as he struggled.

In fetid, rotten darkness, Vardee scrambled to his feet. The petals had closed together to form an egg-shaped hollow, room-size. Smothering sweet foulness rose in choking clouds. Dizzy, nauseated, he staggered and fell against the walls. He beat wildly upon the leathery surface, which was covered with spiny fuzz and the hint of moisture. It yielded before him like flesh, pliable, but with the toughness of tempered rubber. There was nothing to grip, no handholds, nothing but a semi-solid substance which writhed away from his groping fingers with ugly *aliveness,* rippling, withdrawing.

Runnels of nauseous liquid oozed from the walls and collected in a pool around his trampling feet. It clung like thin glue to his boots, but thickened swiftly, impending movement. He knew what it was, digestive fluid, the enzymes of which would dissolve his boots like corrosive acid. Overpowering stench rose through his nostrils to swirl in his brain, drugging him. Death was close. Already its approach paralyzed his muscles.

He floundered, knees buckling, and felt himself slipping into the bubbling pool.

Dimly he was aware that a shaft of light split surrounding darkness. There was a sound of tearing, an impression of something jabbing and hacking at the tough, enclosing petals of his prison.

AN EXTENDED hand, leather-gloved, gripped him and dragged his limp body into the half-light of the forest. The girl, of course! Brandishing a machete. He had forgotten her. Still caught in his poisonous floral dream, he clawed at aromatic webs and the forest glare blinded him. Stumbling, half-alive, he was shoved along the path, forced roughly to climb a ladder which seemed endless. Fiery liquid got inside his throat, trickled down and exploded in his stomach. Clothes were being stripped from him. He felt he should resent this indignity, but for the moment was incapable of actively resenting anything.

Blurring fogs cleared from his mind. He sat on a bunk, nearly naked. On the floor beside him were his outer garments, black rot eating them swiftly while he tried to focus his eyes. He shuddered.

Marta Apri stood above him, one hand bare, while the glove she had removed rotted away. She looked down at him with an expression mingling malicious joy and exasperated concern.

"How'd a city greenhorn like you ever get this far?" she asked.

Vardee told her. "I came by sled. Tracking a rad-storm. It came west along the 34th parallel. It wasn't supposed to. I had to follow, to establish a mobile base. If I could have got a fix on it from three points, an hour apart, its new course and velocity could be calculated from the arc. My

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sled broke down. Not far."

The girl shook her head. "If you came in by sled, over those mountains, there must be more to you than I thought. So there really is a storm. I don't think you'd better worry about it now. Don't worry about anything. I'll take care of you and get you back to those apron-strings. As soon as you're up to it, we'll take off."

Vardee grinned. "Who's rescuing who? Aren't you the girl I had to spank a few minutes ago?"

Her eyes sparked, then softened. "Forget it...for now. If there is a rad-storm, I had it coming. If not, we'll settle it later and Pluto help you if you're kidding me. You'll have to wear my spare hunting suit. Don't worry; it's one of father's. Get dressed, and pick up your armor from the sled. I caught my grull-cat. I'll get him to the copter, and meet you there. Double time, now."

Marta vanished. As he squirmed into the borrowed hunting leather, Vardee did some mental squirming over the message he had beamed to headquarters. If she were the commissioner's daughter....

* * *

Commissioner Apri took one look at the latest message from Junior Weatherman Vardee. Under his tan, he turned the color of wet cement and pushed through a priority call to his home in Quanta City. Suspicion confirmed, he turned back and re-read the brutally ironic message.

"Returning by copter. Contacted female grull-cat hunter. Unreasonable woman, needed spanking. Regret necessity for forcible rescue. Call from home base. If we get through."

Apri and Halbert exchanged glances. "It's Marta all right. Her copter is gone, also my hunting equipment," the commissioner said, voice hoarse with strain. "Think there's a chance...."

"Always a chance..." Halbert murmured, "if she went in by copter. Our friend Vardee seems to have forgotten his storm."

"If you knew my daughter, that wouldn't surprise you." Apri essayed a feeble attempt at a smile. "Quanta City airbase has tried to reach her. No answer...."

THE COPTER moved above a limitless vastness of tumbled green as if a choppy ocean had frozen into jeweled immobility. Motors hummed, the wide blades flailed overhead, the tiny cabin trembled with vibration. In a lull between the mighty tides of wind, the copter had risen from the forest roof and begun a terrifyingly slow flight toward the ghostlike folds of distant mountains. At an airspeed of three hundred, the craft seemed to hang motionless above the endless expanse of jungle, as if suspended by invisible wires from the curdling mist canopy.

To Vardee, the enclosed cabin seemed cramped, infinitely smaller than it was. Girls made him nervous, and this one more than most, but it was not her presence to which he objected. It was the grull-cat's restless movement, the glowering eyes of the beast as it clinked its length of chain, stretching powerful muscles, baring teeth like those of the extinct sabretooth and snarling or yawning as the mood struck it. Beautiful, it was, even half-grown, but there was that indefinable spiritual ferocity which gave the species its respected place in the catalog of terrors.

"Don't mind him," Marta Apri reassured Vardee, turning from the controls. "He knows when he's met his match. I promised myself I'd tame

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one...for a pet. I did it."

"Nobody ever tamed a grull-cat," Vardee objected. "I've read the books. You can't tame them. I've never seen a live one before, not even in captivity. In a zoo, they kill themselves rather than submit."

Marta frowned. "I don't like animals in cages."

"That depends on the animal," Vardee said, eyeing the slow weaving pattern of a spade-shaped head. "I don't like wild ones in a small copter, for that matter."

Marta smiled acidly. "He'll keep the men away from me."

Wind was rising again, smoothly at first, then in gusty spurts as it neared storm velocity. The copter made valiant efforts to better its way above the wind, but the gouts of moving air struck viciously, seeming more like solid matter than gas. The craft jerked and bounced, reeled and recovered, as if it danced a drunken tango with an invisible partner. Sound piled upon sound and climbed a steep crescendo of fury. For every foot gained, the copter was flung back two.

Flailing airscrews shrieked and whined and clattered as chaotic air conditions played tricks of varying resistance upon laboring motors. At the controls, Marta handled the bucking copter like a veteran, but she fought a losing battle. Cutting the airscrew motors, lest the blades tear themselves from the ship by vibration, she switched to rocket power. Results were spectacular. The craft lunged at a fist of air, slowed as if moving in thick syrup, and was tossed backward, end over end. Rocket exhausts twirled a mad pattern of fireworks in the roaring blackness of sky....

"I DON'T care what conditions are like," Commissioner Apri raged. "Marta is in there, and I'm going after her."

"You're crazy," Halbert told him. "Have you ever *seen* a rad-storm. A core of radioactive dust so hot that all the air for a hundred miles rushes in a gigantic whirlpool to the center. It's like a continuous explosion, the air sucked in, superheated, rising on its own expansion in a tight, whirling column, then dissipating in the higher altitudes. It's loaded with contaminated dust and the entire surrounding country is contaminated by it. It's deadly for weeks after a storm has passed. I don't think there's a chance for your daughter or Vardee. If I did, do you think I'd be standing here?"

"What about protective armor?"

Halbert's face twitched. "Good enough...as far as it goes. It would hold for a while, but radiation is not the only danger. You can't imagine the mechanical forces involved. Wind sweeps over the desert sands and picks up enough abrasive to scour the country clean. It's a sandblast that scrubs and polishes the whole area as clean as a picked chicken. I've seen a mountain of solid rock carved into something you could balance on a toothpick...in a matter of hours. I won't order a rescue party into such a deal."

Apri glared wildly at the senior observer. "Nobody asked you to. I'm going myself. And don't try to stop me."

Halbert made a decision. He grinned. "Who wants to? Vardee's my responsibility. I'm going with you. My copter is larger and has more power than these service jobs. We'll take it...."

* * *

Like a swatted insect, Marta's copter was flung headlong. It scrawled fiery hieroglyphs across dark leagues of sky. Unsnapping the metal clips

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which held him in his seat, Vardee made his way forward. Or tried to. It was a series of lunges, first one way, then another, as gravity and direction of motion shifted in the rapidly gyrating cabin. He lost his grip on the funk-bar and fell head first into a bulkhead. He tried again, was shaken loose and rattled about the cabin like a pea in a tin can. He wedged against something furry and unmechanical, which gave a rasping snarl and tried to bite off his head.

Scrambling away from the outraged cat, he resumed his painful effort to reach the controls. The third try he made it, more by accident than through his patient efforts. A sudden upflip of the floor dashing him violently into a bank of levers, his face flattened on the surface of transparent metal sheltering the gauge panel.

The girl hung limply upside down from the pilot seat clips. Vardee dared not unfasten her to take her place. Bracing himself between the levers and the atomic converter housing, he managed to reach the controls. The ship was on even keel, but upside down. After a struggle, involving some contortions on his part, he got the ship righted. Locking controls, he snatched a second to free the girl and clip her out of harm's way against a bulkhead.

Sliding into the pilot's seat, he took stock of his surroundings. They were not encouraging.

Between blank faces of frothing grey sky and featureless jungle, the copter moved with the storm. All about it were the ragged streamers of luminous dust. The copter moved on the fringe of a vortex of wind and fire-shot darkness, suggesting an inverted whirl-pool. On his right, terrifyingly close, was a towering pillar of incredible light, steady, unwavering, although about its center circled the ravening hounds of chaos.

This was it. The blinding, white-hot core, shrouded in whorls of dust and disintegrating gas, was the storm-center. Even in the stress of the moment, Vardee was aware of ironic satisfaction. This was Y-318, his storm, which he had been trying to locate. He had found it....

VARDEE was used to timelessness. In a world where normal alternations of light and darkness do not exist, time itself becomes an arbitrary symbol. In a void which had nothing to do with time or space, he absorbed the mighty spectacle with the detached and critical interest one might feel for a vividly abstract work of art. The composition was circular, like a vast pageant moving to an obvious chaotic climax. Tremendous flows of wind swept in toward a fiery core of destruction, circling in ever-narrowing spiral, and with them, part of the pattern like a fly upon a giant wheel, moved the copter.

Glare drenched the cabin. Objects assumed the stark, unnatural patterns of an overexposed photograph.

Vardee was dimly conscious of the girl, who still hung limply from the clips holding her to the bulkhead. By the eery light, he could see a stream of blood flowing from her hairline, and the lines of shock etching her exquisite, pale heart of face. She was still unconscious. Fortunately. He wondered if it were worth while to rouse her to—

Horror!

He was spared decision. Eyelids flickered, opened. Eyes that were startlingly like those of the grull-cat regarded him with blank stare. Her body flexed against the clips. She tried a bruised smile which did not

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come off. The back of her hand wiped blood from her eyes.

Marta Apri unsnapped the clips and dragged herself unsteadily to share his seat.

"Rough deal," said Vardee, and her nod showed that the headsets still worked. "We didn't make it."

Fascinated by the glare, she stared into the eery spectacle which raved around the copter. She understood, accepted the facts, and shrugged.

"I hope your insurance is paid up, chum," she commented.

"My family wanted me to be an actor," Vardee went on, with a twist of wry humor. "I think maybe they were right." He was not sure he spoke aloud, but she answered.

"Nice stage...big...but the production is overdone. Out of proportion. Overlighted."

The mystical comradeship of imminent death united them as years of acquaintance could never have done. Vardee gestured to the unconscious grull-cat. "Your pet is out cold. I don't know if I banged him with my head ...or if he just fainted. I can't blame him if he did. Might have known I'd end up in an animal act."

Marta turned her pale face to study the shaft of impossible brilliance. She shuddered.

"What happens now?"

"I don't know," Vardee replied. "These storms are unpredictable. Usually they move across country at high speed. This one is staying in one place. It may mean something. Or may not. The wind flows in a sort of pulse, building to a climax, dies away, then starts up again. We hit the peak of effort. I haven't figured—"

"Is there a chance to break away and run from it?"

VARDEE SHOOK his head. "Not a chance. This copter is so banged up it couldn't buck a sidewind, let alone a headwind of gale velocity. As long as we ride the storm, we can stay up. If the wind weren't carrying us like a floating leaf in a millrace, we wouldn't be up now. If it dies, we fall. If not—"

Marta closed her eyes. Her lips moved silently. Then,

"How about sending a message?"

"It might get through. We wouldn't know it, of course, but there's no harm trying. I'd like to send one myself." A ghost of bitter humor chased itself across his face. "To my boss." He put the portable transmitter into her hands, and watched the trembling fingers beat out a message. "Make it brief," he advised.

Marta finished sending, returned the instrument. Vardee grinned as he sent the last of his famous messages:

"Found your storm. What do you want me to do with it?"

When he had completed his report, his eyes sought the girl's. "It would have been nice knowing you," he said.

She nodded. "I hate prolonged goodbyes. Why not head straight into it?"

"Why not?" he agreed. "It would be quicker."

They joined hands on the controls and wrestled against the fury of howling winds. Slowly the nose of the copter swung until it bore dead-center on the pillar of light. Moving cross-current, the ship became a target for the driving sandblast. Tough metallic shell grew hot, pitted and began to wear away. Shuddering forces tugged and thrust at the ship, and the ship itself tried to turn away, as if it fought with uncanny life to preserve itself and its occupants from their madness.

Together, man and girl maintained the course. Vardee opened the rocket jets to full power. Minutes. Seconds.

Visibly the column of glare expand-

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ed. Vardee's arm crept round the girl in a gesture of instinctive tenderness. He braced himself.

With soul-blasting shock, the universe exploded.

Silence flowed round him. Silence and infinite darkness. He was conscious of myriad rustlings, much invisible movement, a weird undercurrent like innumerable hushed voices. He was conscious of himself, alive, functioning, an organic unity of many cells, a single entity composed of thousands of discrete elements, as if countless individual beings had joined together in him for mutual support and protection.

For the first time in his life he was aware of being alive, fully, consciously, of being an integral part of the gigantic composite which was the universe, known and unknown. He was part of the mystery and the mystery was part of him. *He was mystery.*

But not all of mystery. In that moment of complete awareness of life, he was also conscious of death. There had been fear, but in the stress of great emotion, the fear was gone. There was only mystery now, and he was part of it.

ALL ABOUT him were other mysteries, all subdivisions of that same great mystery. That part of him which was identity alone, and not the same as his physical body or his mind, or even anything of that mysterious life-force flowing through him, that part knew and recognized the other mysteries and mingled with them. There was murmur of many small voices together, and their sum a great voice which cried of populous cities and the fiery angels of atomic destruction which had strode across the face of a fair world, leaving desolation and a graveyard of silent cities. The voice spoke of dread and horror, and of a strangeness in which many lives had found themselves, their very bodies torn atom from atom, vaporized and disintegrated. But the life-force was very strong in all of them; and the voice spoke of something which was more than a mechanical functioning of chance-met cells—a life which clung to the shattered and dispersed particles, to the very atomic elements of the blasted bodies. It spoke of a dust which had drawn itself together by affinity to become a new organic unity, function by the very nature of its creation in atomic force.

The mystery in the man knew and recognized the mystery behind the myriads of silent voices; knew and understood. The many voices were the myriads of lives from which the fiery core of atomic disruption had been composed. And the great voice was the storm itself. The storm was alive, with a new kind of life which fed upon and existed in its own nuclear fission, a living, sentient being, capable of thought and emotion. And he knew that the storm was capable of death, because it was dying. It had come home to die. And he knew that the storm, too, had recognized him and the mystery of life in him. Y-318 understood.

Silence flowed round him. Silence and infinite darkness.

He was back in the copter. Before him a column of atomic fire expanded visibly. It flared to intolerable brilliance, faded to the faintest of radiance, died away completely. In its place was a writhing *something* of darkness, a spiralling, pulsing, living intensity of blackness. Thin, delicate tendrils of blackness reached out to enfold the speeding ship. There was curious shock, cushioned vibration, a long second as the copter hung motion-

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less, suspended in mid-air—

The ship was falling, swiftly but gently.

Swirling torrents of air paused, became a huddling confusion, broke ranks and rushed together, milling aimlessly. Blinded, dazed, Vardee saw the ground rush upward.

A MOMENTARY glimpse of a strange city, its buildings sered and ruined by holocaust, a city in which death had come swiftly on wings of terrible glory, a city where a few buildings escaped by a miracle and remained standing just as they had stood for a thousand generations. A silent city, empty now save for the whispering of winds, but a city in which many lives had been lived, a city which had been a home, in which there had been a myriad of voices....

Y-318 had come back to die. Back to the city of its fiery birth. And dying, it had offered a last gift of life to the city of the dead which had been its home.

Fearful melees of sound burst over the dead city as the circular maelstrom became a chaos of undirected violence. Baffled elements seethed in tremendous battle, rioted in senseless, ugly turbulence. A lashing tail of wind caught the falling copter and flung it out of control. It crashed and piled up in crumpled ruin against an ancient wall.

Rain and hail began to fall. A deluge. Lightnings ripped the massed clouds of the overcast to shreds. For moments a gold and scarlet sun shone through upon the silent city, then dark curtains swept back. Thunder roared in broadsides. Lightnings streamed from the black sky. Earth heaved and buckled and the ring of volcanic peaks flared into new life. Rain lashed the city.

Vardee crawled from the wreckage, dragging the injured girl with him into the shelter of a ruinous building. She seemed dead, but he worked over her until youth and strength and the spark of life responded. Breath flowed again, and a faint, troubled heart-beat rewarded his labors. He wept.

Outside the uproar gradually diminished. The last of its savage outcry masked the sound of a descending helicopter. But Vardee heard something like a voice and forced himself to move. From the doorway, he saw two men race toward the shattered wreck of Marta's copter. He called out to them....

AT HEADQUARTERS, Vardee talked. Veterans and expert technicians listened.

"Rad-storms are alive," he told them. "Living, intelligent beings. I can't tell you how I know, exactly, but I know. It knew, and understood. The other storms will understand...if we can get through to them. There is a way to communicate, and in time we can solve it. Then, perhaps, we may really become a weather control service, instead of 'storm-dodgers', as the people call us. I have a feeling that we're almost through dodging rad-storms."

They listened, some skeptically, but they listened. After all, he was the only man who had gone to the heart of the problem. And it looked as if he were going to marry the boss's daughter. The technicians went to work on the problem.

Commissioner Apri was waiting for Vardee outside Marta's room at the hospital.

"She will live," he said. "I won't waste words trying to tell you how I feel...."

Vardee grinned. "You don't have to."

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Apri went on quickly. "Any man who can tame a rad-storm is the logical choice for my son-in-law. Are you interested in the job?"

"If that grull-cat pet of hers hadn't been killed in the crash, I wouldn't consider it. Do you think I could substitute for a grull-cat?"

"Why not ask her... before she gets her strength back? She's waiting for you."

Vardee went inside and closed the door. From within came a sudden crash of glass. The commissioner laughed and went back to the minor problems of weather control.

THE END

THE ASSASSIN

By Charles Recour

HAVV SHIVERED under the crude woolen cloak, but no fear made his muscles tremor. It was cold and drafty in the steel ventilating tubes. Havv drew the cloak tighter about him and crouched deeper into the side-niche.

His deep black eyes burnt with intensity. His tall gaunt frame wasted by hunger and work in the Shops, disguised the fierce energy that captivated him. Havv was destined, Havv had a purpose.

He glanced down the dim-lit metal corridors. It was possible, but unlikely that a guard might wander this route; for it had been a long time since a Shopman had menaced Sklane.

Havv lit a cigarette and as he inhaled the acrid smoke, he had to struggle to withhold a cough. The acrid smoke bit. It had been a long time since he had had such a luxury. But then nothing was too good for a Shopman with the courage to seek out Sklane.

His ears caught the clip-clop of sandals. Havv straightened and made himself squeeze even tighter into the niche. He stepped on the cigarette, an act that caused him silent anguish. One hand caressed the flame-pistol. Half-drawn, he thrust it back into his belt and his fingers found the long, keen-edged knife.

Silently Havv prayed that the guard wouldn't see him. From the confident sound of the nearing footsteps, he knew he hadn't yet been spotted.

As the guard drew abreast of the niche, his steps slowed and faltered. This was it, Havv thought wildly. He flung himself upon the dumb-founded man with ferocity born of desperation. One, two—and the knife was in. The man writhed briefly and then Havv let his body drop to the floor.

The act had taken no more than a minute. Havv glanced at his precious watch which his fellow-Workmen had procured from some forgotten horde of "things". He had seven minutes to go. According to plan he had to go down the tube now. Thank the gods that he had waited. If the guard had been five minutes later, he would have seen Havv and cut him down with one blast.

Almost buoyantly, certainly confidently, Havv started his measured pace. It wasn't a long trip. The grating opening loomed up shortly. He walked up to it and peered through its foot-wide apertures.

The scene which confronted him was exactly that which the Spies had so often said. Havv could hear them now:

"...he sits there like a bloated toad. That fat, rotten pig! Sklane revels in food and women. He is *not* a god. He is like us, only fouled inside..."

Havv saw the reclining figure of the Leader. The gross massiveness of the man did indeed look like a toad. Attendants rushed around him, caring for his slightest wants. Fascinated at the luxury which he had only heard of, Havv brought himself to reality with a start. He must act now!

He raised the heavy flame pistol. There was hardly a chance for him to get away after this night's work. That he knew, but he also knew that he would be leaving a better world. Unhesitatingly he sighted along the shining barrel. He drew an accurate bead on the corpulent figure.

He squeezed the trigger three times and the room beneath his ruptured into coruscant violence. In the maze of smoke Havv caught glimpses of mangled and mutilated flesh—but there was nothing in the position where Sklane had been.

Exultantly Havv ran back along the musty tube, heedless now of cold. And when the first guards appeared at the mouth of the ventilating tube, Havv ran toward them unafraid—almost eagerly—for death was nothing to fear. Havv laughed in his eagerness to meet it—for his children, and his children's children would never face another Sklane...

★ ★ ★

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COLOR COMING UP!

By A. T. Kedzie

JUST AROUND the corner of the immediate future lies another miracle in human communications—color television. As a matter of fact, it exists, here and now, and in the solemn chambers of the FCC and in the oak-paneled board-rooms of the company directorates, battles are going to determine just how the new development will be presented. There are two color systems, whose complications are beyond the discussion of an article like this.

It is sufficient to say however, that one method of making color TV uses a series of three cathode ray tubes in the receiver. The other, and simpler system uses a rotating disk, mounted in front of the TV receiver and driven by a small electric motor. This latter technique produces a very fine image, and is also in the stage where it could be presented to the public almost immediately.

But the former system—which is all-electronic—and has not a single bit of mechanical gadgetry is the promising one. It, so far, does not produce as good an image as the second, disk method—yet! But it is the one which holds the greatest promise for the future. Consequently the battle seems to be this: should we have color TV of an inferior type now, or wait five or ten years until the bugs will have been completely ironed out. The subject is such a hot potato that the FCC (the Federal Communications Commission) is tossing it around as gingerly as a man holding a hot stove-lid in his bare hands.

Some common sense attitude will be worked out. It is interesting to note that a lot of problems of a technological nature such as this are being decided by the men best qualified to pass judgment—rather than by some silly sort of Congressional lobbying.

★ ★ ★

ETERNAL WANDERER

By W. R. Chase

THE FOLKLORE of the spaceways is as rich and entertaining as that of any people or place. And as in all stories there is just enough truth to gripping, just enough fantasy to be intriguing.

"Son," the grizzled veteran of many a Martian or Jovian or Plutonian run would say to the wide-eyed youngster at his side, whose first space flight included a lot of hanging around the crew and officers, "son, them stars have seen sights we'd be ashamed to talk about." He'd gesture through the port with a stubby finger and maybe put a hand on the lad's shoulder.

"You've read in the history books in school son, about the tale of the Terran ocean-hopper, the Flying Dutchman, but let me tell you lad, you ain't heard a thing until you've run into the story of The Seeker.

"It's enough to make your blood run cold, that story is. The Seeker—and he's still a-huntin' a port—was a selfish, rotten shell of a man. Yes, he was an Earthman, but one rotten apple don't make a barrel.

"He was on the Callisto—Luna hop through the Asteroid belt with a load of radioactives. They was short half-life stuff and every minute he saved in getting them to Luna was a hundred thousand credits in his bank account. An' the penny pincher knew it.

"He was cuttin' through the Belt with gynos wide-open when his radioman caught a call on the monitor. Yes, son, the freighter picked up an Emergency from a liner that had caught a heavy chunk of metal in the nose and was in sad need of help.

"You know the unwritten code of the spaceways—help your fellow rocketeer when he's in trouble. Well lad, this devil looks at his radioman and says as cool as you please, 'keep 'er wide open. We ain't stoppin'!'

"Yes sir, that man ran right through the belt and ignored the Emergency—an' every single soul aboard the liner died before the patrol could get there.

"But that ain't the end of the story son. That Captain never made Luna. Somethin' jumped his navigatin' instruments, and he couldn't plot a course. An' his radio went out. He wasn't heard from again.

"But year in and year out, somebody always spots his ship. His gynos are full-on, and he's in navigating radio range, but somehow he never makes it. His punishment is to ride the rocketways for all time, never managing to port his ship, always wandering through the system, seeking, forever seeking. An' that's the story of the Seeker..."

And the little boy will be open-mouthed at the tale, and he'll press his face against the port peering into space. And as often as not, the old-timer will thrust out a finger and say:

"See that light! That's him, son! As sure as I'm here, that's the Seeker..."

★ ★ ★

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The CHALICE of

The Chalice was a symbol of beauty – but like its namesake, evil would plague the owner . . .

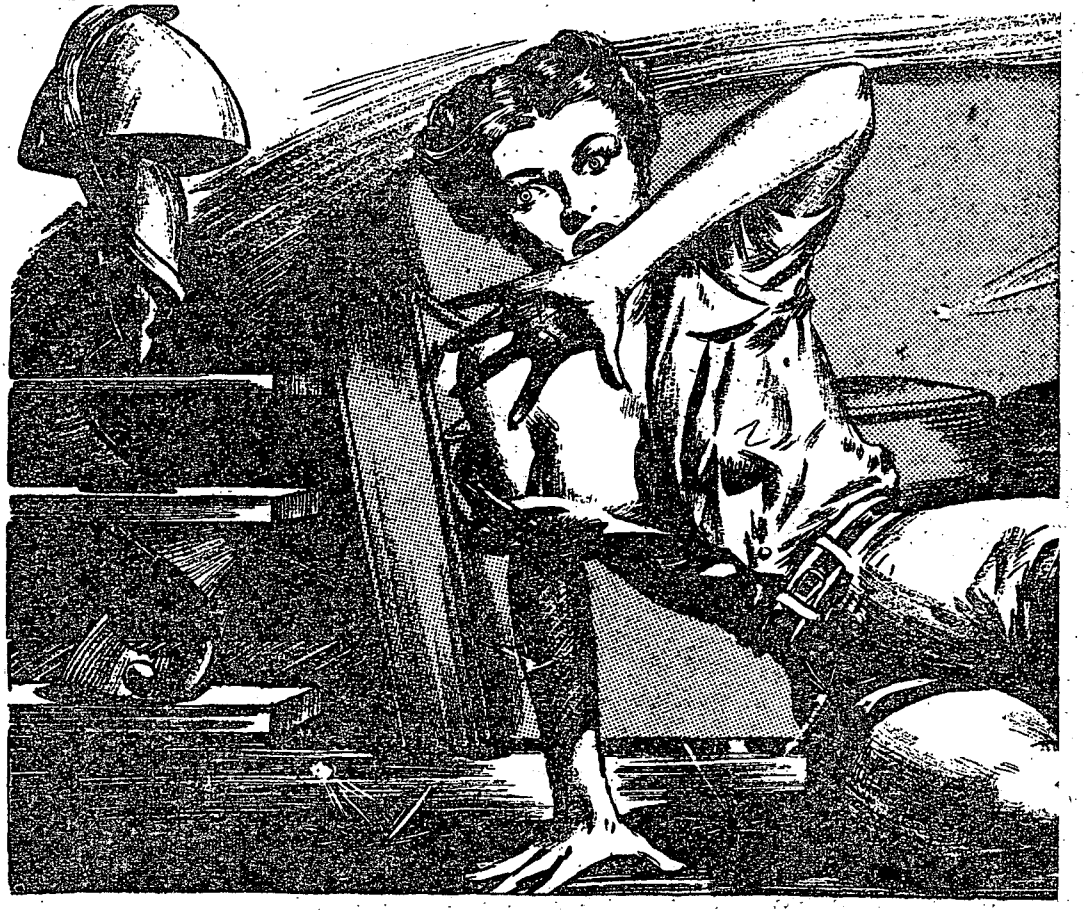
CHAPTER ONE

GERDLU of Callisto bared his fangs in what was intended to be an ingratiating smile. A less experienced receptionist and secretary than Mary Dugan would have fainted at mere sight of the spider-man, with his chitinous body suspended from six many-jointed legs; but Mary had been connected with Interplanetary Expositions, Inc., long enough to take them as they came.

"Both Mr. Lane and Mr. Pendergast are out of the city," she responded to his inquiry. "Mr. Lane has gone to Venus and Mr. Pender—"

The Callistan's solitary faceted eye seemed to expand—to occupy all space with its dizzying red-orange light. A moment later, Mary Dugan was staring straight ahead and saying in a mechanical voice:

"Mr. Lane is out on the fair



She raised her arm in sudden fear as the barrage struck around her body . . .

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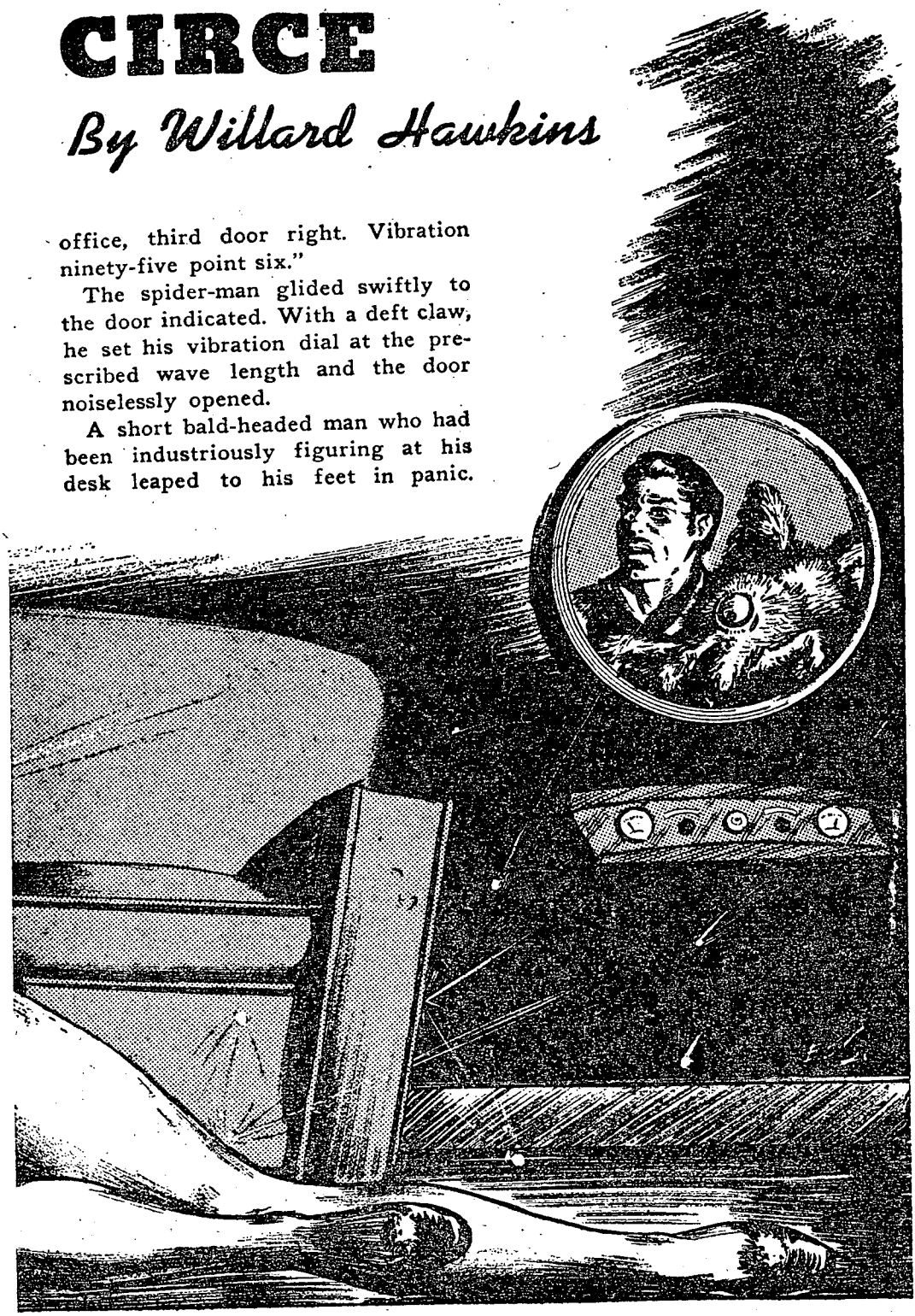
CIRCE

By Willard Hawkins

office, third door right. Vibration ninety-five point six."

The spider-man glided swiftly to the door indicated. With a deft claw, he set his vibration dial at the prescribed wave length and the door noiselessly opened.

A short bald-headed man who had been industriously figuring at his desk leaped to his feet in panic.



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"Wh-what do you want?" he gasped. "Who let you—?"

The ingratiating grimace was repeated. In his rasping voice, Gerdlu explained, "The Callistan delegation wishes assurance that the forthcoming contest will be conducted with fairness. They will consider it an insult if their candidate is slighted by the judges. They wish to make clear—"

He was jostled by Mary Dugan, who burst into the room, eyes ablaze, every inch of her trim figure, clad in its abbreviated costume of the day, expressing fury.

"Mr. Pendergast, this phony pulled a hypnotic on me! I told him you and Mr. Lane were out—and then he glittered that nasty red eye of his and the first I knew I'd spilled everything. If that's the way they're trying to win the beauty contest—"

Pendergast struggled to master his nervousness.

"That's right—that's right," he blustered. "Won't do to use hypnotic influence on the judges, Mr. Grr—Grr—"

"Gerdlu," supplied the spider-man.

"Er—yes, certainly. At any rate, tell your delegation that the judging will be strictly impartial."

"That is gratifying. In that case, hypnotic suggestion will not be required. The Callistans have confidence in their candidate. They wish to know, however, what standards of beauty will be employed. It would be unfortunate if terrestrial standards—"

Pendergast drew himself pompously to his full height. "The rules definitely state that abstract standards are to prevail."

The Callistan bobbed in what probably was his version of a courtly bow. Nevertheless, his tone was quietly menacing.

"That assurance will be taken back to my delegation. They would be much disappointed if standards unfair to their candidate should force them to return without the winner's cup."

HE WITHDREW, while Pendergast sank into his chair, wiping a moist brow. Godfrey Lane found him thus, with Mary Dugan vigorously expounding her opinion of alien planet creatures, and spider-men in particular, when he breezed in a few minutes later.

"Godfrey," blurted Pendergast, at the appearance of his partner, "why can't we drop the whole thing?"

"Drop what thing?"

"Don't play innocent. Your bright ideas have gotten us into a lot of messes; but this interplanetary beauty contest beats all the rest for pure, unadulterated grief."

Lane tossed his cap and watched with satisfaction as it settled at a rakish angle on a bust on his partner's desk.

"One of those Callistan freaks was here," Mary explained. "It seems Callistans take their beauty contests seriously. It will be a great disappointment if they have to go back without the cup. So great that they might feel tempted to do something unpleasant about it."

"They all take it seriously," moaned Pendergast. "Who do you think the latest entry is from? The turtle-people of Ganymede. They actually think some chunk of gristle from their race is a sure winner."

"Fine!" enthused Lane. "The more the better."

"You're missing the point. Don't you see, Godfrey, whoever wins the contest, all the rest are going to be sure it was a frameup against their queen? We'll have sixty-seven kinds

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of interplanetary trouble right here on the fair grounds."

"No fooling," cut in Mary. "This beauty contest idea of yours is just a little too hot."

"You too, Mary!" he said, in mock dejection. "Just when I'm ready to spring my latest and best idea."

"Is this one colossal or merely stupendous?"

"Well may you ask! It's supercolossal. Ever hear of the Bluebird?"

"There's some kind of an ancient legend—"

"Right you are. Popular around the twentieth century. It tells how a couple of kids went all over the known and unknown world searching for something, only to discover it in their own back yard."

"Which has nothing to do with the subject."

"No? How about this angle? Right now, Interplanetary Expositions, Inc., is searching throughout the world and its colonies to locate Miss Terrestrial—the most beautiful female of the human species. We carry this search right up to the final contest. Excitement rises to fever heat. And who do you suppose wins?"

"Who?" demanded Pendergast, hypnotized by his partner's eloquence.

"None other than a home-town gal hailing from Luna City—our own offices, mind you! Yes, our own little Mary. All the time we've been searching the universe for its outstanding beauty, she's been working right under our noses—blind creatures that we are! If that isn't bringing the Bluebird up to date, I don't know a publicity gag when I see one."

In spite of himself, Pendergast was impressed. "Godfrey," he exclaimed, "it's immense."

"With only one flaw," added the girl laconically. "Little Mary won't play."

"When you have a chance to become the outstanding—"

"I know! I know! Well, in the first place, I couldn't hold a candle to some of those glamor girls you'll be importing."

"You don't know the miracles our makeup department can perform," protested Lane. "I've seem them take even homelier wenches than you and make 'em positively gorgeous."

"Mary's a damned pretty girl," defended Pendergast loyally.

"In the second place," continued the girl, "I've no desire to be torn to pieces when the big event comes off and those assorted spider gals and elephant venuses and scorpion dames make up their minds they've been double-crossed out of the decision."

Lane raised his eyebrows mockingly. "So you're going to win the finals too! Modest little Mary!"

"Whoever wins, I don't hanker to be around at the pay-off."

"I've already entered your name."

"Then you can withdraw it. And if you aren't too stiff-necked to take a tip—better call the whole thing off."

CHAPTER II

BUT THIS was a late day to think of calling the contest off. Far-flung publicity had started the ball rolling, and the results had astonished Lane, despite his unblushing admission that the idea was one of the most marvellous ever hatched from his prolific brain. Already it was pulling the Interplanetary Exposition, now in its third year under the great dome of Luna City, out of the red.

The team of Pendergast and Lane, promoters of the exposition, ought to have been full of rejoicing. Instead,

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Al Pendergast, senior member, was being rapidly reduced to a nervous wreck, while even Godfrey Lane's youthful assurance at times rang hollow.

Gerdlu's visit, with its implied threat, was merely one of several incidents carrying ominous portent.

The Plutonian delegation served notice that the five precepts of beauty formulated by their revered prophet, Dooveroo, must be adopted in toto as a basis of judgment—or else! The precepts to the average terrestrial seemed to have nothing to do with beauty. In any event, none but a Plutonian could be considered eligible according to these precepts.

A bright particular problem was introduced when the government of Ceres sent an envoy to inquire into the meaning of the provision that "any feminine member of the race" could be entered in the contest. They reminded the promoters that sex was unknown on Ceres, where the dominant life-forms multiplied by the vastly superior method of fission. Was this intended as a slap at the Ceresians?

The envoy was mollified with an amendment which provided that races not divided into sexes might select a representative according to standards of their own devising.

Whereas the inhabitants of Titan presented a petition for further change in the rules. "It is well known that the females of Titan make no claims to beauty, while the neuters of this race out-shine the most beautiful creatures of all planets. By the rules, they are barred from participating. Such unfriendly discrimination cannot be tolerated. We respectfully suggest that the Terrestrial government amend the rules to avoid such unfairness."

It was this communication that brought Lieutenant Compton of the Interplanetary Police to the offices of Pendergast and Lane.

"What's the idea?" demanded the junior partner. "I thought Al and I were running this contest."

"Private enterprise isn't understood by these totalitarian planets," responded Compton grimly. "To them, anything undertaken by earthmen is sponsored by Earth. At that, it looks to me as if the I.P. must have been asleep when it let you spring this."

"Tell the I.P. to keep its shirt on," retorted Lane, disrespectfully. "This is just a little publicity stunt—one of the oldest in the archives of promotion. As for Titan's trifling complaint, we'll interpret the rules to satisfy them."

"Couldn't the I.P. issue an order canceling the contest?" piped Al Pendergast quaveringly. "That way they couldn't blame us—"

"No, but they'd blame the I.P.," retorted Compton. "Most of the delegations are either here now or on their way. They'd jump at the conclusion that the contest was called off to keep their particular glamor queen from winning."

"Sure," agreed Lane. "That's what I've been telling Al. Nothing for it now but to face the music."

Compton shook his head glumly. "It's crazy—the very thing that ought to be avoided—bringing all these jealous races together. Anything may happen. How are you going to judge such a contest, anyway?"

"We'll employ abstract standards," was Lane's airy reply.

"Who's going to employ them? Do you mean to say you can look at an aquatic Venusian and put out of mind the fact that to you she resembles a particularly loathsome variety of squid? If you were a Callistan, could you regard a terrestrial cutie as any-

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thing more attractive than a grub? Abstract standards, my eye!"

"I'm working on a plan," Lane assured him.

Compton was unimpressed. "I've sent for reinforcements. We'll try to prepare for emergencies—that's all there is left to do."

CHAPTER III

TWO DAYS—earth time—before the preliminary contest for the selection of Miss Terrestrial, Lane again broached the subject of entering to Mary Dugan. So definite was her refusal that the word "flat" fails to describe it.

"You're missing the opportunity of a lifetime."

"To be made into hash," she amended.

"You exaggerate."

"How about the Venusian squid and that sting-ray thing from Deimos?"

To this parting shot, he had no answer. She alluded to a "regrettable incident", as Lane described it for the benefit of the news services. The two beauty contestants from Venus and one of its moons had been accorded quarters opening into the same transparent tank in the exposition's huge "Temple of Beauty". It was an error of judgment. When the battle was over, what was left of the contestants could not have been termed beautiful, even by members of their own races.

The affair was annoying from many standpoints. Previous publicity had centered on the glamor and gayety of the contest. News of this tragic incident gave a hint of its underlying menace.

The partners spent hours ironing matters out with the offended governments. Each faction left clear implication that the one way of avoiding enormous damage suits, and possible interplanetary trouble, was to insure that the beauty award would go to its representative in the contest—for of course both sent fresh entrants to replace the martyred queens who had done each other in.

"What gets me," Mary complained to Lane, "is that not one delegation thinks the affair is on the level. They're all scheming to pull a fast one—like hypnotizing the judges, or scaring the daylights out of them. Which reminds me. You still haven't disclosed how you're going to decide the main contest."

"I've got a lulu of a scheme figured out," he assured her. "Passes the buck in truly magnificent style. Mary—" he looked at her hopefully— "as a very special favor, won't you please—?"

"The answer again is no!"

He shook his head reproachfully. "I was merely going to ask you, as a special favor, when you come over to help below stage tomorrow, if you'll wear that tricky little costume of yours with the red trunks and silver-trimmed upper dingus."

"Why?"

"Because it helps me to concentrate."

She stared after him blankly as he walked away. Despite the fact that she had worked for him some three years, Lane still had the faculty of disconcerting her with his whimsies.

An amphitheater accommodating a million people—this had been one of Godfrey Lane's dreams, and in the great Luna Colosseum he had come within striking distance of achieving it. The problems involved were tremendous, but modern architectural science had been equal to them. Over a thousand tube entrances, some located a mile distant from the daz-

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zling, many-faceted structure which towered like an iridescent monument over the exposition grounds, served to convey visitors to their sections without congestion at any point.

The audience looked down upon a central stage which, by a triumph of refractive engineering, seemed directly in front of each section. Ingenious sound amplification made every spoken word audible.

Sections were equipped to provide for the idiosyncrasies of the various planetary races. Tubes conveying aquatic creatures deposited them through air locks into tank-like sections filled with the fluid of their natural habitat. Similar compartments were filled with the various native atmospheres.

WHILE THE great edifice filled for the terrestrial beauty contest, in which the earth entry—Miss Terrestrial—would be chosen for the finals, Lane and his technicians were hard at work back-stage. "Back-stage", in this instance, meant below, since the stage effects were handled from a honeycomb of rooms and passages underneath.

When necessary, any section of the stage could be screened from view of the audience by refractive screens. Thus, while one spectacle was in progress, another might be in preparation on the seemingly unoccupied portion of the same stage.

Of all the staff, Lane was on the least tension, as far as surface appearances indicated. In a veritable bedlam, with press agents, delegation representatives, and newscasters bombarding him every minute with demands and questions; with scantily clad girl contestants and their maids running here and there on frenzied missions, he appeared calmly unconcerned.

To Al Pendergast had been delegated the comparatively peaceful task of sitting with the judges, who were even now self-consciously surveying the audience from a box at the stage rim.

When Mary Dugan responded to a hurry call from Lane, she found him engaged in testing some flood-lighting equipment. He motioned her to a dapper little man in white whom she recognized as Fleury from the makeup department.

"Sit down please." Fleury regarded her closely as she obeyed. "First we apply the base cream." He demonstrated with deft fingers. "Then the cheeks—a delicate tint. Shaded just right—so!"

"Wait a minute!" Mary protested. "What is this?"

"I want to test the lighting with actual makeup," Lane explained. He turned to the electrician. "Intensify the gamma ray. See what it does?"

"Makes her look faded."

"Exactly. Now some more of the delta."

Eventually, he seemed to get the light to suit him. Fleury stepped back and admired his handiwork.

"Beautiful!" he exclaimed. "A remarkable treatment, if I do say it. What fortunate region does the young lady represent?"

"You've got your wires crossed," Mary informed him acidly.

Lane chuckled. "She's not a contender—just our handy girl."

Mary flushed under his frankly admiring gaze. "I wore my silver-and-red, as you asked, so you could concentrate," she observed sharply. "I didn't know you meant concentrating on my costume."

As she spoke, the electrician pushed aside the light-blending projector, so that they could look into the wall screen. At his touch on the

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switch, the screen became a front-row seat looking out on the stage.

"It's already going on!" exclaimed Mary.

Against a velvety-black background, a striking-looking blonde was walking with stately tread, to the accompaniment of soft music, toward the judges' box. When almost there, she paused and pirouetted slowly, exhibiting her figure from all angles, then, after a moment's self-conscious pause beneath the eyes of the half-million or more spectators, she walked down a short ramp, handed a slip of paper containing her identification number to the judges' clerk, and disappeared from view through a velvet curtain.

The clerk read the number aloud, "Fifty-four." At the same moment, a huge crystal ball, high above the stage, flashed the number in letters of light, following with the designation of the entrant, "Miss Southern Hemisphere."

For an instant, the stage was black. There was a hush of expectancy. Then a spot of light focused on a point near the center, where the glamor girl next in line had suddenly appeared. In the moment of darkness, she had been transported from below stage to a slowly revolving platform. As the platform came to rest after a single revolution, she descended, to parade across the stage as her predecessor had done.

"Nice figure," commented Mary, "but—" she hesitated.

"Coloring too pasty," volunteered the electrician. "This next number isn't so hot, either. If these are the best Earth can produce—"

They watched three or four others cross the stage, then Lane scribbled something on a slip of paper.

"I've got to get hold of Al," he said hastily. He glanced toward the judges' box, where his partner sat perspiring between two of the judging staff. "No way to reach him by visi-phone, we purposely didn't install them in the judges' box to avoid possibility of outside influence. Take him this note for me, will you?"

"What's the idea?" Mary asked, vaguely distrustful.

"I've had another inspiration. While the judges are making their decision, we're going to levitate the cup that will be awarded at the interplanetary contest two weeks from now—let the crowd feast their eyes on it. I want Al to make a little announcement. We'll call it the Chalice of Circe."

"The what?"

"Circe was a beautiful siren of mythology. The chalice was the cup she used to drink out of—or to serve ambrosia to her lovers—something like that."

"You've got your mythology mixed," objected Mary. "As I remember—"

"Doesn't matter. No time to argue. Take this note to Al." He folded it hastily and thrust it into Mary's hand, then hustled her down the corridor to one of the stage traps.

Mary stepped into the round enclosed booth, clutching at the slender hand support. She experienced a brief moment of giddiness as the floor began to rise—then was enveloped in total darkness.

CHAPTER IV

BY THE slight click and sensation of stopping, Mary knew that the segment of platform on which she stood had become part of the vast stage. The darkness was complete, except for one spot of light far ahead of her, in which a sinuous figure—white limbs and scanty jeweled cos-

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tume flashing—was walking in time with the slow music toward the judges' box.

With a gasp of dismay, Mary realized that she had come up near the middle of the stage. The next instant, she was bathed in a dazzling floodlight.

She checked an impulse to run, for fear of attracting more attention. The floor began to revolve.

In spite of its appalling aspects, the situation was absurd. Whoever was directing the lighting effects no doubt assumed that another glamor girl had presented herself for that tiresome across-stage parade.

The least conspicuous thing she could do was to walk nonchalantly to the judges' box, deliver her message, and disappear. The audience would think she was another contestant, while the note would explain her presence to the judges.

The slow music insensibly delayed her footsteps as she descended from the platform and, with head held high, walked toward the pencil of light that indicated her destination. She could sense—even if she could barely see—the huge audience, the vast open space beneath the central dome in which she, a tiny figure, walked under the critical view of more than a half-million eyes.

"All the thrill of being in the contest, without the glory!" she reflected. A moment later, she was passing the note crumpled in her palm to the clerk at the front of the judges' stand.

"For Mr. Pendergast," she murmured, then hurriedly sought the comforting concealment of the black curtain.

Through an excited concourse of contestants and their retinues, Mary shouldered her way to the testing room, where she found Lane and the electrician still at the viewing screen.

"You inconsiderate louse!" she choked. "I believe you did it on purpose. If that's your idea of a joke—!"

"Hold everything!" Lane admonished. "The judges are going to announce their decision."

"Didn't take 'em long," breathed the electrician.

Restraining herself for the moment, Mary watched the screen. Tyrone Hopwood, the world's premier producer of television spectacles, was rising to his feet in the judges' box.

"Friends, lovers of beauty, you of the vast audience in this building, to say nothing of the millions who have enjoyed this spectacle by television," he began pompously. Mary's attention wandered, to be recalled as he concluded impressively:

"And now to end your suspense. The judges' task was rendered easy when, among all the lovely contestants who crossed in review, there appeared one who so far outshone the rest that there could be no dissenting opinion. It seems superfluous to inform the audience that this outstanding contestant was—" he paused to consult the slip of paper in his hands— "number seventy-eight, the duly entered candidate from Luna City—Miss Mary Dugan."

Then the applause broke loose.

CHAPTER V

GODFREY LANE turned to Mary with a sheepish grin. She was staring open-mouthed at the television screen. There was a confusion of voices and running feet in the corridor. The door burst open and some one shouted, "Here she is!" Then the room was swarming with news correspondents.

They shouted questions, pushed the bewildered girl into impromptu

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poses, held recording instruments to her lips, flashed her features on millions of news screens as she uttered gasping protests.

Off at one side, Lane was pouring his version of the occurrence into willing ears.

"I'm flabbergasted," he declared. "Never occurred to us that she'd have the ghost of a chance against those glorious contestants from Earth and elsewhere. You know—that reminds me—"

"Yes! Go on, Mr. Lane," prompted one of the newscasters.

"Well, it reminds me somehow of an old legend. Something about a bluebird. Look it up, boys—that's a tip—if you want something for your headlines."

Mary at length managed to slip unobserved into a tube car which transferred her to the deserted offices in the administration building. She wanted to be alone—to think—to recover some measure of her poise—to be very sure of her determination. Her apartment would no doubt be surrounded by newscasters. They hadn't thought of waiting for her here.

She paused before a rest-room mirror and gazed at herself unbelievingly. Her chic silver-and-red costume was fetching; her features and coloring were good; her figure, with arms and legs bare in the accepted fashion of the day, was trim and neat.

"I'm good," she acknowledged impartially. "Yeah—but not that good. There's something fishy about it all. And what I'll tell Godfrey Lane—"

On second thought, she decided to tell him by letter. When the stinging resignation was framed to her satisfaction, she strode into his office. It was disconcerting to find him at his desk.

"Oh, it's you!" he said in evident relief, putting down the visiphone into which he had been talking.

Her fury flamed into expression.

"I came to leave this on your desk; but I've a lot to tell you in person. Of all the scurvy tricks! And I fell for it. 'Wear that silver-red costume—it helps me to concentrate.' 'I want to test the lighting effect on make-up.' 'Take this note to Al—you only have to walk up to the judges' stand.' Yes, I fell for it. But you outsmarted yourself, boss. Little Mary still isn't going to play. I don't know how you did it—aside from the trick you played on me—but there's something cheesy about the whole affair."

Lane had the grace to wilt under the barrage.

"Gosh, Mary. Any other girl would give twenty years of her life to be in your sandals today."

"I don't like being played for a sap. By the way, how did you put it over? Bribe the judges?"

"Perhaps I can answer that question."

Mary whirled sharply at the suave voice that came from the open doorway behind her. A swarthy-skinned earthman in the para-fiber garb of the Martian settlements was smiling sardonically.

"This is a private conference," Lane informed him.

"I agree. It is private—between the two of us," the stranger observed with self-assurance. "However, the young lady may stay if she likes. Let me introduce myself. I am Vittorio Renoud, of the Martian Metropolitan. Also of the delegation which accompanied the unsuccessful candidate from the Martian earth settlement."

"I'm sorry your candidate didn't win, Mr. Renoud; but—"

"You mistake my purpose. The reason I came to Luna City—I shall be entirely frank with you—was to fer-

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ret out, if possible, certain secrets of light diffusion developed by your technicians."

"Others have tried to steal our secrets," Lane informed him tersely. "You'll discover little, for all your spying."

"It will not be necessary to spy, Mr. Lane, since I expect you to turn those secrets over to me of your own accord. Or—" he paused deliberately— "would you rather have me make public a peculiar fact concerning today's lighting arrangements?"

Mary watched Lane's face go pale. He turned abruptly to request, "Mary, see if you can locate Al. Tell him I want him here. Then go get some rest. I'm sorry about everything."

She started for the door panel, then hesitated.

"You had me deliver another message to Al today," she said. "That was a trick. What is it this time?"

"Please, Mary."

She studied him s h r e w d l y. "Couldn't be that you're trying to get rid of me?"

"As your employer, I insist—"

"My resignation is on your desk, so I'm no longer an employee. What was the peculiar fact you discovered, Mr. Renoud?"

The Mars dweller had been watching the byplay with appreciation.

"It was this," he said slowly. "Although your technicians employed what appeared to be the same light in the dressing rooms as on the stage, the quality of makeup was altered materially under the stage lights."

"Bunk!" retorted Lane tersely.

"Unfortunately," smiled Renoud, "our tests clearly reveal the difference. How it was accomplished we do not know; but of the result there is no doubt. Makeup applied under the dressing-room lights appeared faded under the stage lights. The young ladies did not look their best—most decidedly far from it. By a peculiar circumstance, only one contestant was so fortunate as to have her makeup applied under the lighting which was actually used on the stage."

He bowed sardonically toward Mary. "As the eloquent spokesman for the judges remarked in my hearing, it was like gazing upon the sun's brilliance after comparing the radiance of a succession of pale moons."

White and rigid Mary stood, her hands clenched into fists. Then, covering her face, she stumbled from the room.

CHAPTER VI

TO ALL the importunities of press and television news services, the answer given by the harassed staff of Interplanetary Expositions was the same: "Miss Dugan is unable to see any one."

Forced into a corner, Al Pendergast finally blurted out the truth. "We don't know where she is. She's disappeared."

After that, Godfrey Lane, looking hollow-eyed and worried, yielded to the inevitable and gave the newscasters an audience.

"Boys," he said, "I'd have told you before, but I knew you wouldn't believe me. We're completely at sea. I've had an army of detectives on the job. No results."

"Pretty thin, Godfrey," observed the correspondent for Terrestrial Broadcasters. "It's a publicity stunt, of course; but in a place like Luna City, with every space-port and lock guarded—"

"I know," responded Lane shortly. "Nevertheless, it's true. I'm posting a reward for information leading to her discovery."

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"And won't you be surprised," some one jeered, "when she unexpectedly turns up on the day of the big contest!"

IN HER narrow quarters within the Callistan space vessel, Mary Dugan tuned in on the latest broadcast involving her disappearance.

"...has increased the reward for information leading to discovery of her whereabouts to this fabulous amount," the commentator was saying. "He also advanced a fantastic motive for the young woman's disappearance. Lane's story is that she objected to entering the contest and appeared against her will. This, ladies and gentlemen of the television audience, is obvious press-agent stuff. It is hardly reasonable that any girl would resent winning so high an honor as that of Earth's reigning beauty, or that she could be tricked into entering a contest against her will. Also, it must be remembered that no one could leave Luna City without passing through a series of closely guarded space locks—and Mary Dugan most certainly passed through none of them."

The girl switched off the voice. She wanted to think.

There was no hint that Lane, or any one else, suspected the manner of her abduction. Lane had every reason to think she was doing an exceptionally clever job of hiding out. Her note of resignation was conclusive evidence on that point. "No use trying to find me—because I'll be hiding where you'd never think to look."

It had been an empty boast. At the moment of writing, she had no thought of how to carry it out. But Gerdlu of Callisto had made the boast a reality by appearing suddenly and focusing that big red eye upon her. She dimly remembered following him.

Three successive guards whom they passed no doubt had assured Lane and detectives that no Mary Dugan escaped through the locks. Their sincerity must have been convincing. They did not see her when she passed because Gerdlu hypnotically commanded them not to see her. Once outside, they had entered his space tender and come directly to the Callistan vessel.

The possibility that hypnosis might have been employed in abducting Mary had, it is true, passed fleetingly through Lane's mind. But it was merely one of various fantastic theories which battled for recognition—all of which became meaningless in view of her expressed intention to vanish of her own accord.

With the day of the great interplanetary contest almost at hand, he had enough to occupy his attention without stewing over Mary's fate. But this did not deter him from doing a man-sized job of worrying.

The zest seemed to have gone out of the whole undertaking, as far as he was concerned. He left important details to Al Pendergast, who was muddling them beyond imagining.

"How are we going to get out of this mess?" he wailed, appealing to Lane. "I had to promise that we'd disqualify any candidate who couldn't show Grade D intelligence, and now the Turlocks of Pluto are raising Cain. Claim the rule was invoked against them. And blast me if I don't suspect that it was. Those Turlock females are gorgeous in coloring—graceful, too. But they're without any intelligence at all. The males have all the brains. Another thing—"

"Go on," Lane told him wearily.

"A lot of them are kicking about your big idea—having one member

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of each contesting race on the jury."

"What's the matter with that?"

"It means each number will get one vote—from her home-planet judge. It's the same as having each contestant vote for herself."

"Ah, but you overlook the big thing!" For a moment, Lane was almost his enthusiastic self. "Each judge is compelled to cast a second-choice vote for a different candidate. The second-choice votes decide the contest."

"News commentators say it means that the ugliest will win. To give their candidtate a better chance, each of these judges is going to cast his second vote for the creature he rates lowest."

"That's their lookout," commented Lane. "If any one has a better idea, I'm receptive."

CHAPTER VII

THE ANNOUNCEMENT had no doubt been a shock to many of the delegations who had counted upon having a small group of judges to terrorize, bribe, or otherwise influence. Several objected to including a Callistan on the jury, on the ground that so many races were subject to hypnotic control. Lane met this objection by building a separate turret for the Callistan judge, locating it well back of the main crescent of judges' booths.

Gerdlu took no offense at this evidence of distrust. He seemed, in fact, more amiable as the contest day drew near.

Encountering Lane on the fair grounds, he chided, "You are thinking of the one you call Mary. No word as yet?"

"None. Gerdlu, with the science your race is said to possess, you ought to be able to help me."

The Callistan chuckled appreciatively. "You overrate our abilities. Still, we do have, in our space vessel, an instrument which in your language might be translated as a 'locator'. Its scope is somewhat limited."

At Lane's sudden show of interest, the Callistan explained further. The instrument could be so attuned as to indicate the direction in which a specific metal was located. It was used to locate rare mineral deposits.

"Something like an ancient doodlebug," commented Lane. "I don't see—" he paused, recalling that Mary possessed a wrist-band of flexible Ionian murrinite, on which her watch and vibration dials were mounted. The Ionian ambassador, who presented it to her, had declared that it was probably the only bit of that metal worn on the moon.

"It is worth a trial," Gerdlu agreed, when Lane offered the suggestion. "We can readily attune the instrument to that substance. If you wish to accompany me to our vessel—"

Lane accepted eagerly. However, before accompanying the Callistan, he took the precaution of informing Lieutenant Compton of his purpose. "Never trust a Callistan" was a familiar byword.

It was morning on Luna's earth-side hemisphere, and the great surrounding plain was jammed with spacecraft of all types. Gerdlu's ship, however, was swinging in an orbit overhead and it was necessary to reach it by a small tender.

Inside of the Callistan vessel, Lane glanced curiously around the unfamiliar control room.

Gerdlu carelessly pointed to a cased-in device. "The instrument I spoke of," he observed. "However, we shall waste no time employing its aid. Step into the observation room and I will show you something much

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better, I'm sure you'll agree."

With a definite sense of alarm, Lane entered the narrow cubicle indicated. The click of the door panel brought him around sharply. Gerdlu had not entered with him.

"What's all this?" Lane demanded harshly.

The Callistan's visage flashed on one of the several view-plates. "Now, Mr. Lane," said his rasping voice, "we will come to terms."

"Then this was a trick? I'm your prisoner?"

"Only temporarily, Mr. Lane. I am certain you will be reasonable."

THERE CAME to Lane the spine-pricking realization that he was wholly in the power of this spider-man. In his eagerness to follow every lead, no matter how forlorn, that might lead to Mary, he had walked into a trap.

Still, the Callistan knew he had left word where he was going, and why. Gerdlu would hardly dare to injure him or to detain him indefinitely in the face of that.

"What do you want?" Lane demanded shortly.

"Need I state, Mr. Lane? We Callistans are proud. We do not wish to be outclassed. It is a coveted honor of my people to be acknowledged the most beautiful in the solar system."

"I'm not judging the contest."

"But you arranged—shall we say by a trick of lighting—to favor your entrant in the terrestrial contest."

"Light effects won't help in the interplanetary contest."

"Perhaps not. There is a method, however, which will insure the beauty from Callisto winning the cup to which she is entitled."

"Whatever you have in mind, the answer is no. It's no secret that I'm here in your company. If I'm not back in reasonable time, the I.P. will take a hand. I'm sure you wouldn't care to have Callisto suspended from the International Planetary Federation because of your blundering, Gerdlu."

The Callistan seemed undisturbed. "A peculiar fact we have learned about human psychology is that you people are handicapped by the phenomena you call emotions. This seems to be especially the case when the emotion you call love is involved."

As he spoke, a second viewplate flashed into illumination. As if looking through a window, Lane saw Mary Dugan listlessly resting on a couch in a small, cell-like chamber.

"She's here! You've had her all the time!"

Gerdlu chuckled sardonically. "Now let us have some fun. We Callistans are a very humorous race."

As Lane stared apprehensively, a tiny thread of light flashed across the room, flicking Mary's bare arm. She sprang up as if something had stung her, looking around in bewilderment.

Another sliver of light darted forth, touching her cheek. She dodged away, only to meet another crossing thread.

"Ionized light beams," explained Gerdlu, "carrying an electric current. Watch as we increase the intensity."

Suddenly the room was crossed in every direction with the slivers of light, looking like strands of flashing cobweb. The girl sprang this way and that, bewilderedly trying to evade the sting of contact. Abruptly the auditory accompaniment of the viewscreen flashed on, and scream after scream of pain and terror reached the horrified ears of the watcher.

"Stop it! Stop it!" roared Lane, beating impotently on the Callistan's

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viewplate with doubled fists.

At once, the darting cobwebs of light vanished. The girl stumbled to her cot and threw herself down, sobbing convulsively.

"A strange phenomenon," commented Gerdlu's voice. "You would have been capable of standing much greater torture yourself, yet you are unnerved merely by another's suffering."

"Curse you, Gerdlu! Curse you and all your heartless race!"

The Callistan chuckled. "Do you wish a further demonstration, or shall we reach an agreement now?"

"What agreement?" demanded Lane belligerently.

The viewplate revealing Mary's room was suddenly criss-crossed again with flashing lights. Again the girl was darting around the cramped space, her features contorted with agony.

"Stop!" cried Lane. "I agree!"

Gerdlu emitted his unpleasant chuckle as the viewplate cleared and Mary sank quivering to the floor.

"She will sustain no harm," he observed. "Not a mark will show. It requires more than two hours for the treatment to cause death. I hope such extreme action will not be required."

Lane fumed at his helplessness. "Tell me what you expect."

"The young lady will be kept here as a hostage until the contest. You and I will return to Luna City. If you should become unfriendly—if you refuse to carry out my suggestions—members of my delegation still quartered in the vessel will take great pleasure in administering the needle death to the one about whom you are so concerned."

Lane answered with cold fury, "Gerdlu, you and your tribe ought to be wiped out of the solar system! If ever ruthless extermination was justified—"

"Perhaps," the Callistan interjected softly, "you wish another demonstration."

"No. I'll play along. Only, once you've attained your purpose, how do I know you'll let her go?"

"You have my promise."

"The word of a Callistan!"

"To employ one of your racial idioms, take it or leave it. After all, Mr. Lane, if we failed to keep our agreement, what reason would you have for keeping quiet about this afterward?"

"What makes you think I'll keep quiet anyway?"

"I hardly think, Mr. Lane, that you would be eager to proclaim that your contest was not conducted—as you say—on the level."

The Callistan seemed to have figured out all the angles.

"Very well," Lane conceded. "But I warn you, if Mary Dugan isn't safely back within an hour after the contest is decided, I'll expose the whole business, regardless of personal consequences. You can guess," he added grimly, "what that would mean."

"We should be torn to pieces," agreed Gerdlu. "So it is plain that my promise will be kept. Shall we return?"

CHAPTER VIII

ALTHOUGH Luna Colosseum accommodated more than half a million, seating capacity for the Interplanetary Beauty Contest was woefully inadequate. All tickets of admission had been sold weeks before the event. As the time drew close, fantastic prices were offered to the fortunate holders of seats.

True, the scene was being televised to every part of the solar system; but merely witnessing it from an easy chair on some distant planet

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lacked the thrill of being part of the spectacle.

The matter of precedence and delicate apportionment of space among the twenty-odd planetary delegations was a problem in itself. Al Pendergast was on the verge of collapse as a result of toiling to satisfy everyone. More than ever, he missed the efficient assistance of Mary Dugan.

While the semi-circle of booths at the edge of the stage was slowly filling with the judges entrusted with representing their planetary groups, the audience was being treated to various forms of aesthetic entertainment. Enormous ingenuity had been exercised to insure each race its preferred brand. The earth section listened to the strains of a symphony orchestra. The aquatic Venusian creatures witnessed a vivid color-graph display. The Callistans thrilled to an atrocious cacophony that would have driven an earth audience crazy. Although, to each section of the audience, the entertainment seemed to come from the stage, in actuality most of it was projected through screens and amplifying devices.

From the subterranean control room, Lane and Pendergast could view any selected part of the colosseum by visiscreen.

Although his practiced eye took note of anything, and he mechanically dispatched instructions to various members of the staff, the undercurrent of Lane's thoughts was anxiety for Mary. Would the Callistan make good his promise? If not, what then? Merely the empty satisfaction of striking back.

The schedule was proceeding inexorably. Already, below stage, the beauty queens were ascending their pedestals or entering their floats. Some—as in case of the Ganymedan turtle woman—were being hoisted into theirs by derricks. Others were being transferred through locks into transparent globes. A tiny creature from some asteroid, scarcely six inches high, was encased in a magnifying sphere, which gave her eel-like figure equal prominence with larger entrants.

THROUGH HIS televisor, Lane scanned the long corridor in which these preparations were taking place. He noted with a pang the pedestal around which there was no excited gathering. It bore a shield emblazoned with the legend, "Miss Terrestrial."

"Glad she's out of this mess," he reflected grimly. "But where the devil is she now?" Gerdlu would soon have to make good.

The Callistan's plan for winning the beauty contest was simplicity in itself. He entrusted to Lane a box of medallion-like objects, each apparently nothing more than a Callistan garnet in a platinum-like setting. They could readily, as Gerdlu pointed out, be worked into the decorative scheme of the canopy shading the judges' booths—one to each booth.

"Do you mean that you can extend your hypnotic influence through these—use them as substitute eyes—and compel the other judge's to vote for your candidate?"

"Not all the judges," rasped the spider-man. "Less than half the races are subject to hypnotic influence. However, that should be enough."

Lane's view of the preparations was interrupted by the approach of Lieutenant Compton. The I.P. man looked grim. Without comment, he handed Lane a piece of what looked like a crumbling wafer, with queer characters impressed upon it. The fragment felt peculiarly unsubstantial.

"It's written," Compton explained, answering Lane's inquiring glance,

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"on eluso-fabric, which evaporates rapidly except in a vacuum. It will vanish in a few minutes."

"The writing seems to be Martian," observed Pendergast, peering at it. "What do they want?"

"It's addressed to the Martian delegation," responded Compton; "but it comes from the Triturians of Mercury. Each delegation received a similar threat, I have no doubt, although Vignu of Mars was the only one with the courage to disclose it to me."

"The Triturians are tough babies," acknowledged Lane.

"Maybe so," defended Pendergast; "but I will say that they've acted pretty decent so far."

"Because," said Compton, "they're smart. They waited until the last minute to shoot their barb. The note merely states that if any except the Triturian candidtate is voted the most beautiful, the winner and every delegate from her planet will suffer the energy death."

"Blasting rockets!" gasped the senior partner.

The energy death—colloquially known as the firecracker death—was one of the most agonizing known to the solar system. The Mercurians—inheritors of a strange science—possessed a weapon which fired a charge of seemingly pure energy. When it reached its mark, there occurred a strange reaction. Beginning at the outer extremities and darting about through the body of the victim, there occurred a series of explosions. The effect was not unlike the crackling of a bunch of ancient firecrackers. It continued until the body had been torn to shreds.

Though his first impulse was one of horror, Lane's second response was a grim laugh.

"If ever there was retributive justice, this is it," he [illegible] harshly. "For once, Gerdlu has outsmarted himself," he observed.

"I doubt if he'll go through with his plan," Compton conjectured. Lane had taken the I.P. man fully into his confidence relative to the deal with the Callistan and Mary's predicament. The officer added. "Better find out how you stand under this new setup."

Lane's scanning of the crowd located Gerdlu in the isolated box reserved for the judge representing his planet. Evidently the spider-man intended to trust no subordinate with the delicate task of carrying out his scheme.

When the message stating that Lane wished to have a word with him was delivered, Gerdlu read, then tore it up. Assuming that he was under visiscreen observation, he spoke distinctly.

"The answer is yes. We of Callisto can take care of ourselves. Our promise has been kept."

Lane turned to Compton in exasperation. "How does he know what I intend to ask him?"

"Well, what do you intend to ask?"

"Whether he received one of those threatening messages—and whether it affects Mary."

"So he must have assumed. Well, I admire his nerve."

Compton took his departure.

CHAPTER IX

FLASHING his view-screen to the section devoted to the scorpion-like creatures from Mercury, Lane surveyed the red monsters with distaste. Strategically surrounding the section, he discerned several grim faces which he knew belonged to members of the Interplanetary Police. Compton was at least prepared for trouble.

At a stir of excitement in the audience, he switched to the stage. The

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widely acclaimed interplanetary pageant of beauty was in progress.

At first the stage was dark. After a moment, a soft glow appeared in the center. As it throbbed into intensity, a huge, exquisitely graven cup was revealed, the famed Chalice of Circe, which would be awarded to the winner of the contest.

Wraith-like lights began to appear on the stage circumferance. These likewise waxed insensibly into greater intensity, until the audience found itself gazing at a succession of tableaux. The individual displays, ranging from simple pedestals to elaborate floats, glided around the huge circle, passing slowly in front of the crescent comprising the judges' boxes.

Many of the strange planetary creatures were beautiful even to terrestrial eyes—some for their coloring, some for harmony of form. Lane, his worry overshadowing all else, regarded the display without enthusiasm.

"If I were picking the ugliest of the lot," commented Pendergast, "I'd figure it was a toss-up between the Callistan spider woman and that red demon from Mercury. Yet one of them is sure to win— Hello! Good gosh! Look!"

Following the direction of his partner's gaze, Lane stared in blank unbelief.

"Mary! She's in the contest!" Pendergast produced his handkerchief and agitatedly mopped his perspiring brow.

Speechless, Lane could only stare. Standing on the simple pedestal bearing the legend "Miss Terrestrial," with a bewildered expression on her face as if she had just awakened from a deep sleep, was unquestionably Mary Dugan.

Relief swept over Lane like a refreshing wave. So this was the method Gerdlu had chosen for keeping his bargain.

Well, he had made good his promise. Probably the girl had been smuggled in with the equipment for the elaborate Callistan float—placed on her pedestal while under hypnotic control.

His mind suddenly at rest concerning Mary's safety, the publicity man in Lane rose buoyantly to the surface.

"What a wow of a story this will make!" he exclaimed jubilantly to Pendergast. "Kidnapped by—by mysterious beings of whom she has no memory, Miss Terrestrial electrified the vast audience and found herself unexpectedly restored to safety as the floodlights bathed her glorious figure in the great interplanetary beauty contest. Al, it's a knockout! And if she wins!"

He stopped abruptly.

His partner shook his head. "That wouldn't be so hot. Not with that Mercurian threat—"

"No—I forgot. Anyway, she's safe!" Lane's eyes dwelt upon her as if they could never get their fill. Her makeup hadn't been applied with the skill he would have demanded, but for all that, Mary was a glorious show-piece. The fact that you knew her in her wholesome every-day aspect didn't make her any less glamorous.

SHE HAD the presence of mind to hold her pose. It would have been disastrous, in view of the stage mechanisms involved, if she had tried to leave her pedestal.

The parade of beauty candidates circled the stage twice. Then, guided by technicians deep down in the bowels of the stage, they wove through a graceful pattern which brought them eventually to a stop in a semicircular formation facing the judges.

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As if nine-tenths of the terrorized occupants of the judges' circle had not already made up their minds, there was a gesture toward deliberation. At the request of one judge or another, a contestant would be asked to come forward for closer view. The pedestal or flat containing this representative of pulchritude from some far-off world would then glide forward under invisible guidance, while its occupant coyly displayed her charms.

At length came the announcement that voting would commence.

As each judge cast his vote from within his booth, by depressing numbered buttons indicating his first and second choices, verbal announcement was made simultaneously in some seventy different languages, and the numbers flashed into illumination within the crystal ball overhead.

Pendergast and Lane, in the viewroom below stage, watched curiously. The initial choice of the first member of the jury was for Number 17, Miss Aquatic Venus. The second choice was for Number 36, Miss Mercury.

"It's a very simple deduction," commented Lane, "that the judge from Aquatic Venus cast that one—the first vote to save his face with the home folks, the second to placate those vengeful Triturians."

The next voter, while according Miss Pluto first place, also gave second place to Number 36.

The third vote was a surprise. It gave Miss Mars first place, but the second choice went to Miss Terrestrial.

"That Martian has guts!" was Lane's comment to his partner. "He not only defied the Mercurians by turning the threat-note over to Compton, but now he's deliberately snubbing their candidate."

Followed another vote for Miss Mercury as second choice. Then three votes in succession for Miss Terrestrial. Lane felt his spine prickling in vague alarm. Something was wrong.

On a sudden he realized what it was. There had been no votes for Miss Callisto!

"Gerdlu must have thrown up the sponge," he muttered. "Still, I don't understand—"

He sprang to his feet with a gasp. All at once he did understand—fully—horribly.

TENSELY, he followed the next tabulations. By the time seventeen judges had been heard from, Miss Mercury was only two ahead of Miss Terrestrial on second-choice votes. Abruptly, then, the character of the voting changed. Miss Terrestrial began to appear as first choice. Immediately followed a succession of first-choice votes for Miss Mercury. The tabulation of fifty-three votes gave Miss Terrestrial twenty first choice votes, Miss Mercury fourteen.

Lane's muscles grew taut.

"Somebody's got it in for Mary," whimpered Pendergast at his elbow. "If she gets the cup, sure as fate those Mercurians will—"

Ignoring him, Lane leaped into action. Brushing his partner aside, he sped down the long corridor to the tube entrances leading to the judges' boxes. As he sprang into the cage of the tube-car leading to the Callistan box, an attendant ran up breathlessly.

"That tube is out of order, Mr. Lane," he explained. "Must have been jammed purposely. I've got a crew working in there."

Lane paused, his mind reviewing the possibilities. He darted into a "prop" room and seized the first object that looked like a weapon—a long-shafted Venusian trident. With

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this in hand, he stepped into a stage trap-door projector and touched the stud which released its mechanism.

In his rash haste, Lane narrowly missed death. As the platform catapulted him upon the stage, his left shoulder received a smashing blow from the side of a massive float. A few inches closer and he would have been horribly crushed.

Regaining his balance, Lane stumbled toward the judges' boxes.

Members of the audience, both of the Colosseum and those additional millions viewing the spectacle by television, were startled at seeing a disheveled member of the terrestrial race sprinting frantically across the broad stage expanse, waving a six-foot trident.

As he ran, Lane caught the announcement, "First-choice votes now stand, Miss Terrestrial, twenty-seven, Miss Mercury, twenty-one."

The figures spurred him to greater effort. His whole energies were concentrated upon reaching the Callistan box from which unquestionably emanated the hypnotic control that was piling up this calamitous vote for Mary.

The box was separated from the stage by nearly a twenty-foot span, and artificial gravity within the dome of Luna City was nearly at earth intensity.

Summoning all his strength, Lane gathered himself for the leap. The astonished audience saw him leave the stage in a perfect takeoff, apparently bent on self-destruction.

He landed with crashing impact against the turret-like structure. The trident pierced the unsubstantial wall, and his grasp upon it prevented him from falling. One hand grasped at the ledge.

Though taken by surprise, the spider-man occupying the stand moved with lightning speed. Two arms lashed out to grip the earthman by the neck, while another pair disengaged his fingers from the ledge.

Gasping, Lane released the trident shaft and caught at the strangling arms which were clutched around his throat.

The strength seemed to drain from his dangling body; the world went black. Then, with the fury of desperation, he gave a convulsive jerk.

The cruel grip on his throat relaxed; the arms went limp. His despairing wrench must have broken the tough but slender bones.

Clinging with one hand to the Callistan's limply dangling members, Lane groped with the other for his trident and wrenched it free. With savage probes, he sought to bury it in the loathsome body within the box.

At this, Gerdlu stretched forth two more arms and dragged the earthman over the ledge into the booth. The trident caught on the ledge and was wrenched from Lane's grasp.

At close quarters, the two grappled fiercely. With only two of his six prehensile limbs out of commission, the advantage was still with the tough-fibered Callistan. Claws tightened cruelly on Lane's flesh; the fetid breath of the creature was in his face.

As the sharp fangs pierced his neck, the earthman was vaguely conscious of the impacts as some heavy body, followed by another, plummeted over the ledge.

"Easy boy! We'll take over."

He recognized Compton's voice and the uniforms of the Interplanetary Police.

CHAPTER X

WITH A dim awareness that verged upon unconsciousness, Lane felt himself lifted to his feet

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and half carried, half supported across the swaying planks which had been hastily thrust across, like a bridge, from the stage to the Callistan box.

They laid him down, and when he struggled to regain his feet it was again Lieutenant Compton's voice that urged.

"Take it easy. He'll be taken care of." His eyes flicked meaningly toward the Callistan's box, within which three I.P. men were trying to force Gerdlu out onto the improvised ramp.

"The voting!" Lane demanded in alarm, suddenly recollecting his purpose. "They didn't—"

"Your stage director called a recess," explained Compton. He added. "The audience can't see us. We're masked by one of your refractive screens."

Lane's practiced ear caught the crowd murmur and detected a restive note. He rose, slowly and painfully, but with decision.

"The contest is off. I'll make the announcement."

"You're in no condition."

"See if I'm not!" Lane grinned reassuringly as he stepped from the concealment of the refractive screen.

The flood-lights revealed him, a bloody, disheveled figure. He spoke slowly.

"With deep regret, the management of Interplanetary Expositions announces that the contest is declared off. The reason—as it should be scarcely necessary to state—intimidation of judges and illegal influence."

Pausing, Lane turned and pointed to the Chalice of Circe enthroned in the middle of the stage above the array of floats and displays, before continuing.

"The cup we had hoped to present was apparently too well named. Like its ancient prototype, it seems to possess the power of bringing out the beast in so-called civilized beings."

He waited a minute, listening to the excited murmur of the crowd and to the echoing confusion caused by the translation of his announcement into tongues understood by variegated sections of his audience.

His eyes, roving the judges' booths, were drawn by a gleam of red. The villainous body of a Mercurian was squirming from the cubical reserved for that race.

INSTANTLY, Lane interpreted the move as a threat to Mary—a threat of that horrible death he had been seeking to avert.

He dashed across the stage to intercept the scorpion-like creature, unmindful of Compton's warning, "Back, you fool! Get back!"

From a refraction screen at the edge of the stage, a dozen more I.P. men burst into view, joining in pursuit of the Mercurian. Ignoring them, he scuttled toward the bridge leading to the Callistan box.

In one of his tentacles was a gleam of metal. He paused at the rim of the stage and pointed toward the many-legged Gerdlu. A crackling sound rent the air.

Half in and half out of the box, where he had been struggling against his captors, the Callistan began to disrupt with staccato concatenations. The explosions began at his extremities. Claws on two of the writhing limbs crackled and burst. The discharges ran up one jointed limb, then darted to others, in a crescendo of rapid detonations.

Before the horrified eyes of the multitude, the spider-like body was literally torn to shreds.

Lane caught a glimpse of the orange-red eye as it exploded out of the repulsive head. A moment later,

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still jerking spasmodically with the blasts of the energy charge, the mass of shattered bones, shell, and fiber that was left of the Callistan dropped to the depths below.

Amid a bedlam of weird noises made by frightened creatures of every type, the red dweller of Mercury turned and scuttled across the stage. Apparently bent now only on escape, he leaped into a tube leading to below-stage regions and disappeared with the I.P. men in hot pursuit.

Strangely, none of the occupants of the section devoted to Triturian spectators made a move to join in the affray.

"Anesthetic gas," Compton explained in a low tone, indicating the strangely quiescent group. "We had it already, just in case."

A stage executive had taken over from Lane and was exhorting each member of the audience to keep his place. "The danger is over," he assured. "Our Mercurian friends are safely asleep—thanks to the prompt action of the Interplanetary Police. And," he added significantly, "when they wake up, they'll be in their space-ship headed for the hot place where they belong."

The feeble joke helped to avert a threatening panic. Even inhabitants of far-off Pluto chuckled at the allusion to Mercury's devastating heat.

WITH THE conviction that everything was at least temporarily under control, Lane turned to seek Mary. He had not far to look. She was standing at his elbow, and now they were again hidden from the audience by a refractive screen.

"Still hate me?" he demanded humbly.

"I ought to," she retorted. "It's the publicity hound in you I suppose. If you're counting on me to forgive—"

She did not finish. Bursting through a trap-door almost at their feet, Al Pendergast stood struggling to regain his balance, while dabbing at his bald head with his handkerchief. Half a dozen young men erupted from nearby traps at almost the same instant.

"Mary!" he blurted. "They didn't—they didn't—"

"No, they didn't," she assured him. "But if you think I'm going to weep tears of gratitude, you're mistaken. All Mary can think of is the goof who got her into this mess."

"Don't blame me," pleaded Pendergast. "I warned Godfrey. I said to him, 'If you pull any tricks, we'll lose the best secretary we ever had.'"

"I know a dozen just as good," assured Lane.

Mary turned on him, her eyes blazing. "Why you unspeakable—!"

"There you are!" the junior partner observed in a tone of resignation. "If we fight like that now, what's it going to be after we're married?"

Mary gasped. "After we're—!" She turned, conscious of the interested group of newscasters taking it all in.

"The low-down publicity hound," she observed caustically, "even has to do his proposing in public." Her gleaming white shoulders shrugged resignedly.

"All right boys, if he wants it that way, come and get it. You may as well broadcast this kiss—sound effects and all. It's going to be a honey."

They did. And it was!

THE END

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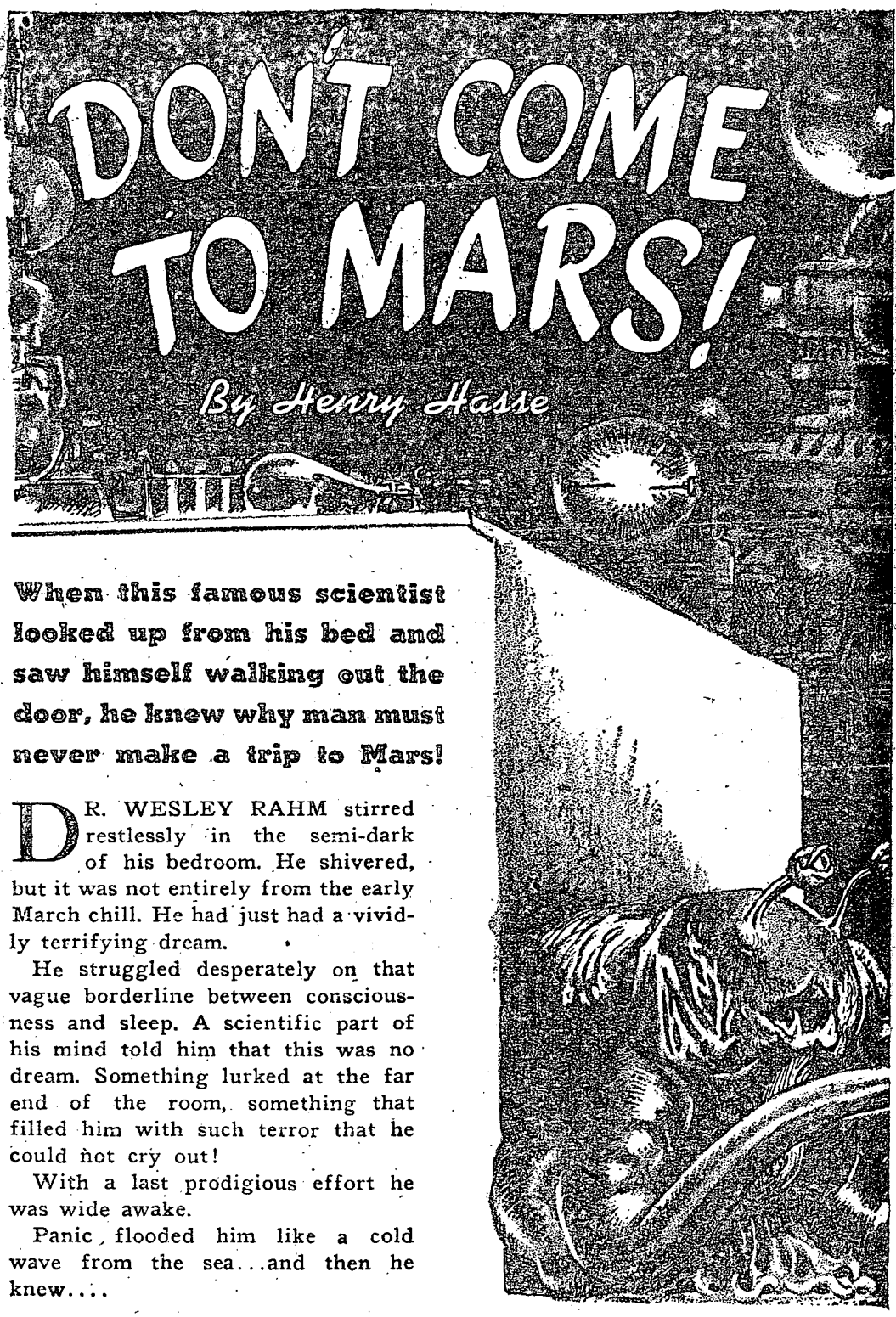
DON'T COME TO MARS!

By Henry Hasse



When this famous scientist looked up from his bed and saw himself walking out the door, he knew why man must never make a trip to Mars!

DR. WESLEY RAHM stirred restlessly in the semi-dark of his bedroom. He shivered, but it was not entirely from the early March chill. He had just had a vividly terrifying dream.

He struggled desperately on that vague borderline between consciousness and sleep. A scientific part of his mind told him that this was no dream. Something lurked at the far end of the room, something that filled him with such terror that he could not cry out!

With a last prodigious effort he was wide awake.

Panic flooded him like a cold wave from the sea...and then he knew....

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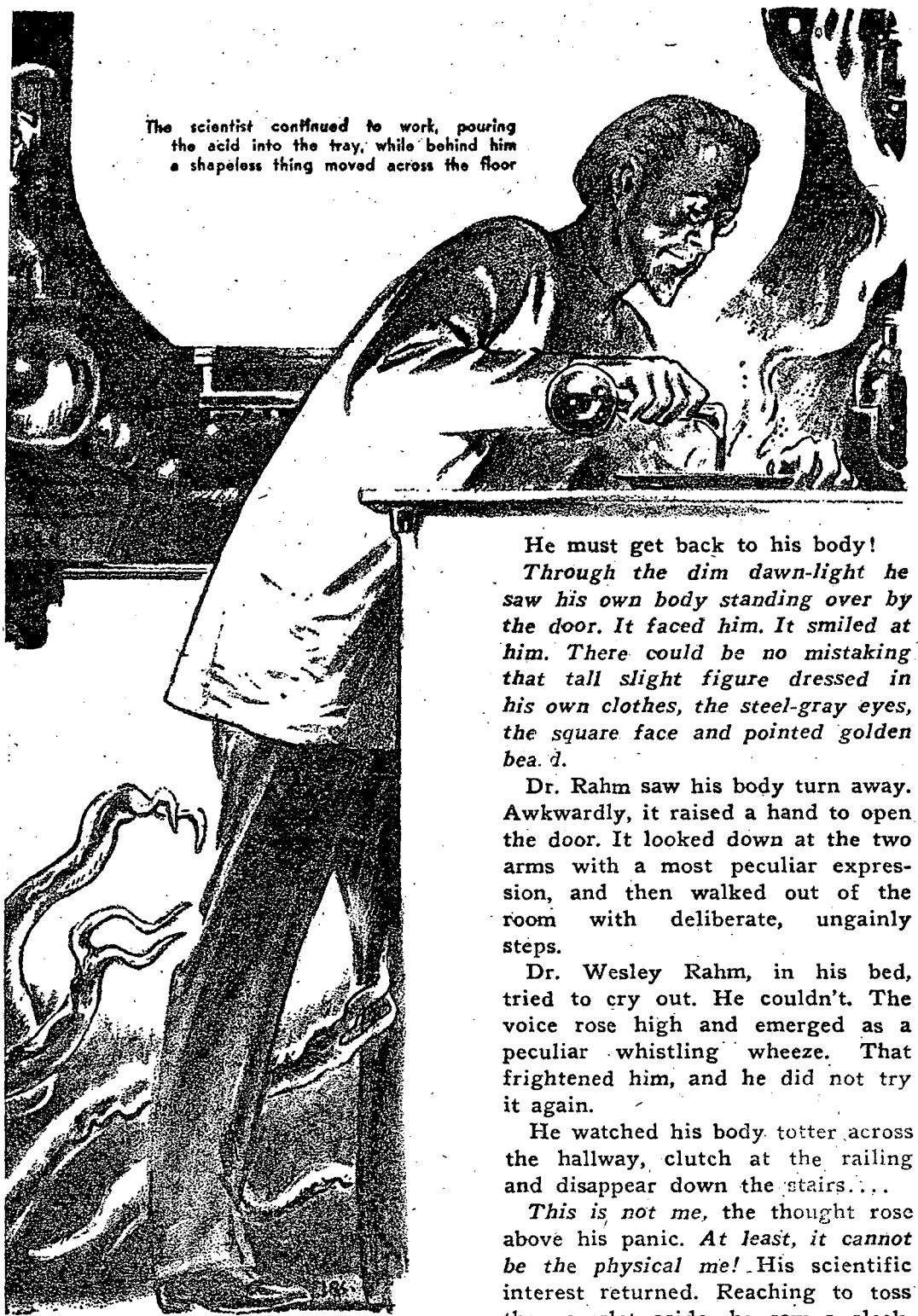

The scientist continued to work, pouring the acid into the tray, while behind him a shapeless thing moved across the floor

He must get back to his body!

Through the dim dawn-light he saw his own body standing over by the door. It faced him. It smiled at him. There could be no mistaking that tall slight figure dressed in his own clothes, the steel-gray eyes, the square face and pointed golden bea. d.

Dr. Rahm saw his body turn away. Awkwardly, it raised a hand to open the door. It looked down at the two arms with a most peculiar expression, and then walked out of the room with deliberate, ungainly steps.

Dr. Wesley Rahm, in his bed, tried to cry out. He couldn't. The voice rose high and emerged as a peculiar whistling wheeze. That frightened him, and he did not try it again.

He watched his body totter across the hallway, clutch at the railing and disappear down the stairs. . . .

This is not me, the thought rose above his panic. *At least, it cannot be the physical me!* His scientific interest returned. Reaching to toss the coverlet aside, he saw a sleek,

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slate-black appendage, an utterly outlandish tentacle! He moved clumsily from the bed. He stood up on stumpy elephantine legs. His body was twice as large as any man's, and it possessed nine of the appendages in varying lengths.

He made his way awkwardly to a mirror and steeled himself against the sight. The head was a triangular blob fringed with waving filaments whose use he could not determine. Two sight organs were protruding and bulbous. In place of nose and mouth he saw a circular set of tiny, gill-like slits. He waved the tentacles helplessly. *Someone or something has stolen my body! But why, why? And why my body, instead of my mind?*

Dr. Rahm put his mind to the problem. He felt sure that this must concern his recent experiments with the interplanet rocket fuel! Twice already the Government had tried to land rockets on the moon, with disastrous results. Dr. Rahm had worked for months on an entirely new type of fuel, and felt that he was very near the goal. No one except himself and Dr. Lawton, his assistant, knew the true nature of the work being conducted in his laboratories outside of town. But now, with his own body wandering somewhere under the spell of an alien intellect....

Whoever or whatever it is, it cannot get very far. I must notify the authorities!

There came a light step in the hall, and before he could move, his elderly housekeeper pushed into the room with his breakfast tray.

"Fine morning, Doctor!" Without looking in his direction she went about arranging his breakfast on the little table. Dr. Rahm felt his alien body stiffen. He tried to move stealthily toward the bathroom. But he wasn't accustomed to so many limbs, and they made a sound against the wall.

Mrs. Stringer turned. She saw him. The coffee-pot clattered to the floor. Her eyes became distended vortices of horror and she whimpered once, like a little dog that is hurt. Then her bony legs carried her from the room, and shriek after shriek accompanied her flight down the hall.

THE POLICE came with amazing speed. Dr. Rahm well realized his danger, knew that they might kill him in their idiotic excitement. But the numerous appendages hampered him, especially on the stairway. The police met him on the front lawn.

"Good lord," Sergeant Mulhany whispered, falling back a step. "She wasn't lying! There it is! Look at that thing."

One of the policemen drew his gun, but Mulhany stopped him just in time. "Don't kill it, you fool, or we may never learn what happened! I think this thing's intelligent. What have you done with Dr. Rahm!" he cried, staying well away from the alien hulk.

"I *am* Dr. Rahm!" the Doctor tried to say. "My body has been stolen by—by whatever mind belongs to this body!" But he could not even create semi-human words with the alien vocal chords, and only the weird whistling sounds emerged.

With some repugnance four policemen laid hands on him, half dragged him out to the street and into the police car.

"You fools!" Rahm tried to say. "Where are you taking me? Get in touch with Dr. Lawton, my assistant! He'll know what to do!"

But they couldn't understand

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him, and the strange sounds made matters worse. "Be mighty careful, boys," one of the policemen said. "I read something once in a weird magazine, about one of these things. By using its mental powers it could blast—"

"Adams, shut up," Mulhany said.

"What do you suppose the thing really is?"

"Search me," Mulhany scratched his head. "Maybe something Dr. Rahm created in his lab, and then it destroyed him. I read that in a story, too," he added.

They arrived at the station-house and thrust the tentacled monster into a barred room. They stood on the outside, surveying him helplessly, at a loss what to do next. Rahm surged against the door and raged at their stupidity.

"Reporters?" someone suggested.

"Yeah, why not. We'll make the headlines! Phone the zoo, too."

"No, no!" Rahm tried to scream. "You clumsy fools, listen to me!" It was then, with the vehement thoughts, that he felt the fringe of filaments atop his head quiver. Suddenly it dawned on him. Those filaments might be a medium for telepathy!

Dr. Lawton! he thought intensely. *Lawton, my assistant! Find him! Bring him here!* He felt his mind reel with the effort, but he continued to send the thought with all the power he could command. He felt that he wasn't getting through; but suddenly one of the men frowned and clapped a big fist into his palm.

"We should have thought of this before! We'd better get in touch with some of the scientists. The man who has been working with Dr. Rahm—what's his name? Lawton. Dr. Lawton."

Exhausted from his effort, Dr. Rahm allowed the alien body to collapse into a corner of the cell.

THE NEWSMEN and photographers came first. They came in droves. They took pictures and rushed away to make the noon editions. Dr. Rahm was big news any day of the week; now, with his disappearance and this monster from God knew where, all other news would be backed off the front page.

"Here's Dr. Lawton!" someone yelled. Lawton was a rotund, red-faced little man who rushed excitedly down the hall. Rahm hurried to the front of the cell to greet his assistant.

"Good lord!" Lawton cried when he sighted the thing. He gaped at the gesturing tentacles. "Who are you? In the name of biological science *what* are you? Where is Dr. Rahm?"

Once again Rahm called upon all his mental power to get a message across. If anyone could understand, or help him get back his body, it was Dr. Lawton. But there was too much turmoil, and Lawton's mind was not clear. He was in a frenzy of apprehension. His loyalty to Dr. Rahm amounted to almost pure worship.

Lawton don't you understand? Make your mind receptive, man! Rahm flailed against the bars in a prodigious mental effort. Lawton blanched, and backed away across the hall.

Rahm shuffled to the rear of the cell. This would never do! He must make them understand! At this very moment his space-fuel formula was probably in danger; he could think of no other reason for this fantastic interchange of identities. The laboratories were well guarded, and only as *Dr. Rahm* could the alien intellect gain access!

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Then, into the tangle of onlookers rushed an excited official. "Dr. Lawton!" he shrieked to make himself heard. "I've had a call from Dr. Rahm's home. He's just returned there! Says he was out for an early morning walk, and he can't imagine what all the excitement is about."

"Thank God," cried Lawton. "Is he on his way here? He may have an explanation for all this."

Dr. Rahm, in his grotesque body, heard. He remained quiet at the rear of the cell. It was with a strange mixture of feelings that he awaited his own body's coming to view him!

They arrived at last. A group of officials and clamoring reporters. Among them was the tall figure of Dr. Rahm, but it did not hurry; it still had the awkward, unfamiliar tread.

The figure paid no heed to the barrage of questions. Approaching the cell, he hesitated and looked down at his two hands as though they were hopelessly inadequate; as though he expected to find more—*nine, perhaps.*

"Dr. Rahm, you seem upset," Lawton greeted him. "Are you ill?"

Dr. Rahm's body shook its head. Then it was opposite the cell. It turned slowly. The intellect within Dr. Rahm's body, and Dr. Rahm's intellect within the alien body, faced each other there in utter silence.

FOR HALF a minute they surveyed each other. The atmosphere was tense. Then the creature within the cell waved his appendages and whistled out:

"Who in heavens name are you?"

He was sure the other being understood.

For a moment the body of Dr. Rahm remained unmoving, unsmiling. Then it turned, and the two hands made a sweeping gesture to indicate that all the others must leave. They left slowly, mumbling little protests. All except Lawton. Lawton stayed as though it were expected of him. Dr. Rahm's face frowned darkly. "Go," the word rumbled out.

"Don't go!" Dr. Rahm within the cell whistled shrilly. "Don't listen to him, Lawton! This is the real me!"

But Lawton left with the others, his brow knit in puzzlement.

Alone, the two faced each other. Apparently a tenuous thread still linked the two minds, for Rahm felt the alien's thoughts impinging delicately.

You ask who I am. I am known as Aiiko, and I have come a long way to accomplish a purpose!

Dr. Rahm felt a rising anger. *I must have my body back! If you harm it—*

Until my mission is carried out I must keep control of your body. Be assured, I will do all within my power to see that no harm comes to it.

Rahm sensed the power of this alien intellect. The fact that Aiiko was telepathing through the unfamiliar medium of a human brain proved it. Rahm meditated a moment, then replied shrewdly, *I admit your superiority. I will offer no resistance to your will, but naturally I am curious. I am accounted one of Earth's greatest scientists. In deference to my standing I feel that explanations are due to me.*

The answer came stark and clear. *I know, Dr. Rahm, who you are. What is it you wish to know?*

First: where did you come from?

I journeyed here in a spaceship of my own construction, from your sister planet—that which you call Mars.

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Rahm's mind leaped. He felt that he must proceed carefully now. *How were you able to assume control of my body?* he projected the thought.

That is not important. The unguarded mind offers easy access. But your will-power was stronger than I suspected, and you unwittingly bridged the gap into my body. That was unfortunate. The transfer back again will be more difficult.

Rahm felt a wave of repugnance at the alien flesh he wore. More than that, he was aghast at the cold dispassionate attitude of the Martian intellect. This inhuman horror had come to Earth for some diabolic purpose! He must learn what it was!

There came a wave of pure intellectual amusement from Aiiko's mind. *I regret to tell you this, Dr. Rahm. You are too close to the secret of inter-planet travel. The first space step after the moon would be Mars...and this must not happen. I am here to see that it does not!*

Rahm stood there numbed, watching his own body smile at him. Now he knew that his initial surmise was correct. *You would destroy my formulae?* he flashed. *You claim to be a scientist! Those are the products of my life's work! I could not replace them for years!*

Aiiko's thought came cold. *Earthians must not reach Mars. Not yet! But I am wasting time here...I came only to see what these clumsy fools would do with my body. I see now that it will be safe for a while.* He turned away, then sent one parting mental shot. *There will be another meeting soon. If you wish your body back, Dr. Rahm, see that MINE is unharmed.*

Rahm's alien body quivered with rage and the nine appendages clutched at the cell bars, but in vain.

HE MUST think logically! Analytically! Already Aiiko was on his way to the laboratories, and certainly the guards would let him through. No doubt there was some vastly terrifying reason for the Martians not wanting Earthmen to achieve space travel! Perhaps the Martians themselves were preparing to descend upon Earth. The thought horrified him. This might be the first move in an invasion by red planet *mind-stealing* armies.

"Why have you made Dr. Rahm act so strangely!" The soft voice startled him, and then he knew it wasn't a voice, but a mental current that bordered upon terror. He lifted his protuberant eyes and saw Lawton standing there. He was alone....

Lawton! There might still be a chance. Quickly his Martian eyes scanned the floor, and in one corner he spied some chunks of plaster fallen from the ceiling. He seized one in the double feeler at the end of an appendage. If only he'd thought of this before! Slowly and shakily, he began to trace letters on the wall. He had Lawton's attention now.

"I," he wrote first, followed by "A-M." Then in a flurry of impatience: "D-R-R-A-H-M."

Lawton's face paled. "Dr. Rahm! *You!*"

Rahm continued. "MUST GET TO LAB! HURRY!"

Lawton's eyes bulged in his pale round face. He wet his lips nervously, still unable to believe. "I must be sure," he muttered, while Rahm lashed the tentacles furiously. "Write more! What's—uh—my wife's first name. And the number

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of our last experiment!"

Quivering with impatience, Rahm wrote both the answers. "HELENE. X-293. HURRY!"

That was enough for Lawton. He turned and sped down the hall. He was back a minute later with the cell keys, but as he fumbled for the right key the jailer came thundering after him.

"Here, you lunatic, what are you doing? You can't let that thing out of there! Dr. Rahm told us to keep it safe!"

Lawton turned. Eyes blazed in his flushed face. Without warning his right fist lashed out and caught the jailer's chin. The man crumpled against the opposite wall.

Nice work, Lawton! Rahm telepathed vigorously as he shambled from the cell.

"Come on, Doc, my car's out in front. I don't know what this is all about, but I'm with you!" Lawton paused only to lift the gun from the jailer's holster, and then they were hurrying down the corridor. Rahm found a use for his tentacles at last. He slapped them against the floor and they sped him along amazingly.

In the outer lobby a startled policeman tried to stop them, but Dr. Rahm was beginning to coordinate these alien muscles now! He whipped the longest tentacle around the man's ankles and jerked him to the floor. Lawton waved the gun and the others fell back. Then he and Lawton were outside, tumbling into the latter's car. They roared away from the curb.

More than ever now Rahm felt a need to communicate with Lawton, tell him all that had happened. But there wasn't time. That Martian intellect housing his body must have reached the laboratory by now! Rahm felt his body quiver with rage and impatience. He was determined to destroy his own Earth body, if need be to stop Aiiko.

The laboratory was a brick farmhouse some five miles out of town. Rahm crouched low on the back seat as they approached the high fence surrounding the property.

"Has Dr. Rahm arrived?" he heard Lawton ask the guard as the main gate swung open.

"Yes, sir; not ten minutes ago. Has something happened to his car? He came in a cab this morning."

Ten minutes! Perhaps they were not too late. Rahm tumbled from the car as it stopped in front of the house. One tentacle closed about the gun where Lawton had placed it on the seat. He whistled something warningly and gestured for Lawton to remain where he was.

Holding the gun aloft, Rahm entered the house and hurried toward the lab where his precious plans were kept. *Those* were all-important! The data was along unprecedented lines. He stood outside the door, listening...for the merest instant, and then he pushed his way in. His gaze took in the litter of implements and papers scattered about the room just as Aiiko, the Martian, whirled the Earth body around to face him...

IT WAS eerie, confronting his own body which he might as a last resort have to kill. Perhaps Aiiko was thinking the same thing; the human face had paled and now it tried to smile, but the result was a grimace.

Rahm glanced at the drawer of his private desk which had been forced open. He surged forward, the filaments atop his head vibrated angrily. *Give me those papers!*

Aiiko glanced at the sheaf of papers in his hands. *I have been study-*

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ing your equations. It is close, very close—

Rahm didn't waste time. He propelled himself forward. The tentacle holding the revolver lashed in a vicious arc toward the Earth head. Aiiko leaped aside as a thought flashed angrily, *You have coordinated the use of my limbs! So have I learned yours.* A fist shot straight from the shoulder and found its mark where the triangular Martian head joined the bulbous body. Dr. Rahm felt excrutiating pain along every nerve...he could not move the tentacles...Aiiko, familiar with the body, had struck a paralyzing center! The tentacle holding the gun went limp, the weapon clattered to the floor.

Aiiko bent down and appropriated it. *So, Dr. Rahm, stand where you are! You blundering fool! Why did you have to interfere? I might have explained to you later...at least I wanted to spare you watching this!*

He placed the sheaf of papers in a metal tray, then examined a row of bottles. Gingerly he lifted one of them. *Acid!* Through a numbing horror Dr. Rahm realized his intention. Aiiko's mission would be accomplished. He would return to Mars with the news that Earth was years away from space travel. What would happen then? Perhaps a Martian invasion. *Anything.* Would it be a year? Two years?

Desperately, Dr. Rahm tried to move. Every muscle of the alien body strained with the effort...and one of the tentacles moved. The paralysis was wearing away! Aiiko didn't notice. With a supreme effort Rahm eased the tentacle forward...close to the floor...it touched the Earth ankle...gently...

Aiiko's backward leap was too late. The Earth body crashed to the floor, but while falling the finger tightened automatically upon the trigger of the gun...twice, three times. Rahm felt the bullets enter his alien body. A hot sticky substance streamed out, but that did not stop him now. Grimly he pulled himself forward. The other tentacles were beginning to move. He wrapped one around the Earth body's throat...

Your own body! came frantically from Aiiko who seemed momentarily stunned.

That doesn't matter! Even if I must die... The tentacle tightened.

Fool! Aiiko's thoughts came in a desperate surge. *You don't know what have you done! I tried to warn you—* Suddenly the Martian thought rose, overwhelmed him, took fierce hold on his mind. Dr. Rahm fought it, but only for seconds. The potential was too great. He felt his mind reeling, he couldn't keep hold ...and then he seemed back in a dream once more.

IN THE dream he was a million miles somewhere in space. There was a great arctic wind, and he was cold. He cringed from the crystal starlight all about him. A great red body appeared, drawing him to it with unimaginable speed. He was on another planet. He knew it was Mars, yet it did not seem strange to him, because he was no longer Dr. Rahm...not even his mind.

This was more than a dream! His mind was alert and hunger-clear. There were alien forms and cities. There was death and destruction and terror abroad, but it did not last long. All substance wavered into shadow.

Again there came swift movement. He was somewhere in the vast stretches of a red desert and terror was here too, terror and frantic

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urgency. He was fleeing...fleeing and hating, as somewhere afar off an omnivorous mind reached out with a snapping intelligence...

It could only have been seconds, but the dream of his flight seemed to encompass an eternity. Then it wavered and blurred and slipped aside, and there was no more terror as Dr. Rahm's mind passed into a great void beyond dreams.

* * *

Dr. Wesley Rahm stirred and sat up. He was on his laboratory floor. He looked dazedly down at his hands. Two hands! Once more he inhabited his comfortable Earth body; comfortable, except for a choking pain around the throat where a tentacle had wrapped.

A figure was bending over him.

"Lawton!"

"I heard the shots. Is it really you, sir? Thank heaven you're yourself again!"

"Lawton! Aiiko—the Martian—don't let him die!"

"I'm afraid it's too late." Lawton glanced with repugnance at the tentacled body. "Three bullets at close range—"

Dr. Rahm arose. He gazed sadly at the grayish hulk. "He shot himself, Lawton. Then he transferred his mind back into his own dying body and gave me mine again! But during that transition...I learned it all...the entire reason for his coming here!"

Rahm turned to the table where the formulae still lay. He took up the bottle of acid, and with a sad smile poured the contents over the papers.

"Dr. Rahm!" Lawton leaped forward.

"No, Lawton. I am myself again. Aiiko came here and gave his life to warn us, and I must carry through his plan. We shall not want space-travel now and shall not achieve it...not for a few years."

Lawton was a picture of abject misery as he watched the papers crumble away.

"It's a strange thing, Lawton. In his dying moments Aiiko gave me the story, together with pictures out of his experience. It was all too vivid! I remember, and I believe!" Rahm passed a hand across his brow as he remembered Aiiko's story. He told it slowly.

MARS WAS a dying planet. The Cismuks were the final race of Mars, and Aiiko was the last of the race. Despite their vast science the race had waned, particularly in the last score of years. Martians had perished in unprecedented numbers, entire cities were decimated, and for no apparent reason! All medical and biological science was put to the problem—without result!

Only recently had the final group of scientists discovered the cause. It dated back more than a century, to the time when one of their Leaders, the super-minds, went mad. At that time he was cast out of the Supreme Council and it was thought that he had wandered into the Red Desert and died.

Such was far from the truth. This crazed creature, a super-intellect, had taken refuge in the desert. There he labored unceasingly to prove his theories on mental wave-lengths and absorption. And he succeeded! He proved his theories with vengeance! He worked at first through thalamic scanners which contacted other Martian minds and brought them into tune with his own. Gradually, he amplified the process. By means of inverse magnetic wave-lengths he literally *absorbed other minds into his own reservoir!* Everywhere across the

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planet, slowly at first but with increasing frequency, Martian bodies died, but not before their mental power was absorbed into the consciousness of this mad creature to become a part of that madness!

Dr. Rahm paused for a moment. He was pale and shaken as he relived the story and the terror which Aiiko had shown him.

What a revenge this creature planned on those who had cast him out! His dream of conquest grew. He had fashioned a vast stronghold beneath the desert sands, and there he lived on, undetected, as the power of his consciousness multiplied in direct ratio to the depleted Martian populace. Only recently did the last of the Martian scientists find him. They fought, bringing all weapons into play, but it was too late. This mad creature had become a vast entity whose mental power encompassed most of the planet. *And he dreamed of further conquests...*

Aiiko was the last. Fleeing to the furthermost pole of Mars, he finished the spaceship on which his colleagues had been working. He travelled to Earth. Imagine his horror upon learning that Earthmen were on the verge of space-travel and contemplating a trip to Mars! Aiiko destroyed his own space vessel, and then sought to destroy my plans.

DR. RAHM stopped there. The horror of events as telepathed by Aiiko were still mirrored in his eyes.

Lawton was silent too, but he looked sadly at the heap of ashes that had been the work of so many months, even years.

"You should never had done this, Dr. Rahm. Earthmen could have tried for other planets! Venus..."

"No, Lawton. For ages Mars has been a challenge. It's the first logical space-step. And who would believe Aiiko's story? In their colossal confidence Earthmen would try for Mars anyway. Their lives and minds would be forfeit as that mad intellect on Mars grew stronger. *Already it had conquered a world! And it still lives!* Our first spacer wouldn't return, and others would go—and others and others. We would be feeding it!

"Aiiko foresaw all this. He knew that intellect might *conceive a spaceship of its own, if we sent it a model!* But Lawton...if we leave it alone, for a few years at the most, it will die for lack of mental sustenance! There are no more minds on Mars."

Lawton nodded solemnly, accepting this truth. But his mind was wry with bitter thoughts.

"I know," Rahm went on. "You worked hard with me on this, but it isn't as though it were lost. No knowledge is ever lost. Others are working on the problem and they'll find the way; perhaps better than we. Let us only hope, not too soon!"

Wistfully he stirred the ashes, all that was left of his work. They eddied and drifted gently up.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH:—

THE MENTAL ASSASSINS

By GREGG CONRAD

A gripping tale of adventure in the strangest of all worlds—a madman's mind! Be sure and reserve your copy ahead of time at your newsdealer...

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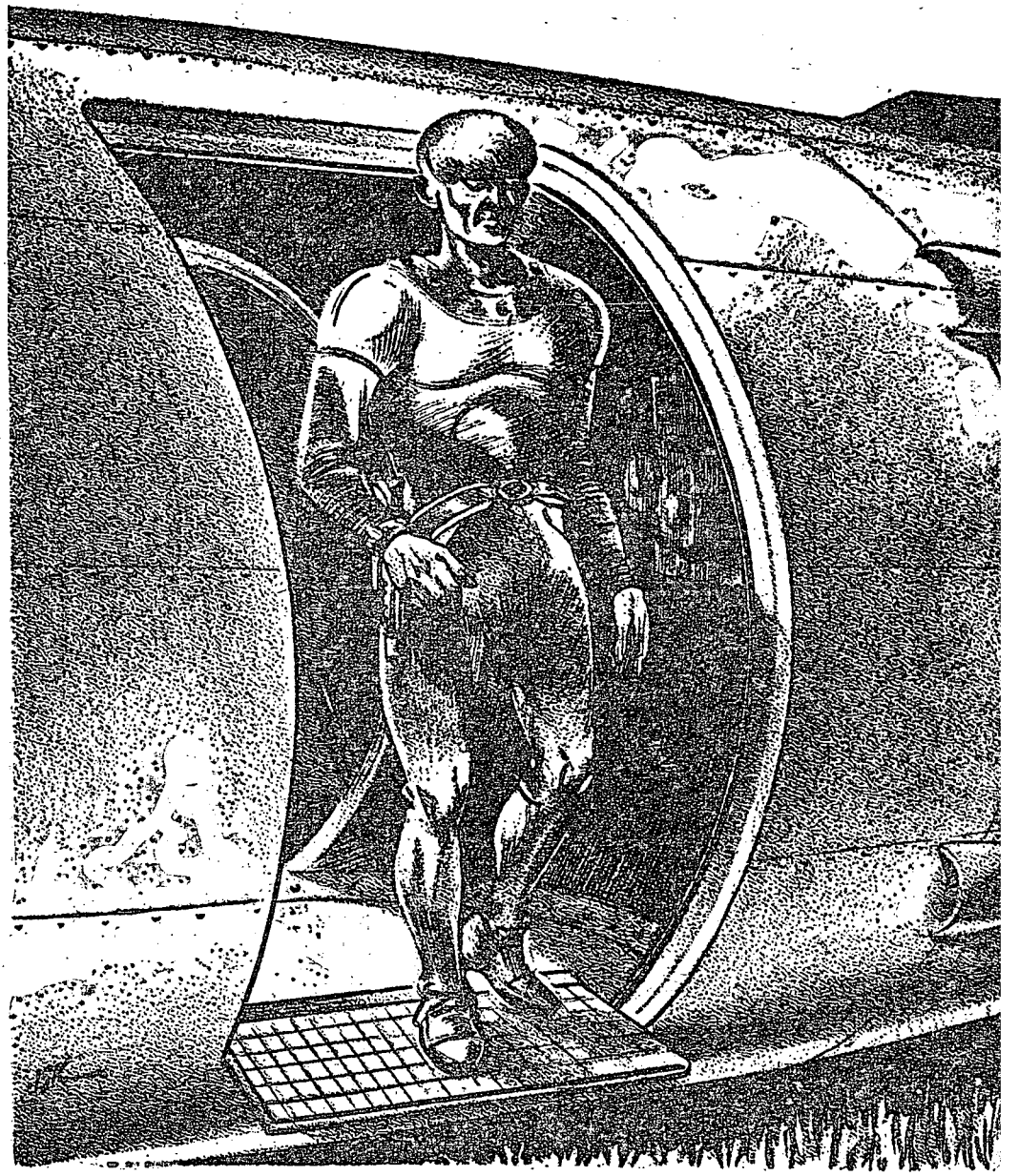
ISOLATIONIST

By Mack Reynolds



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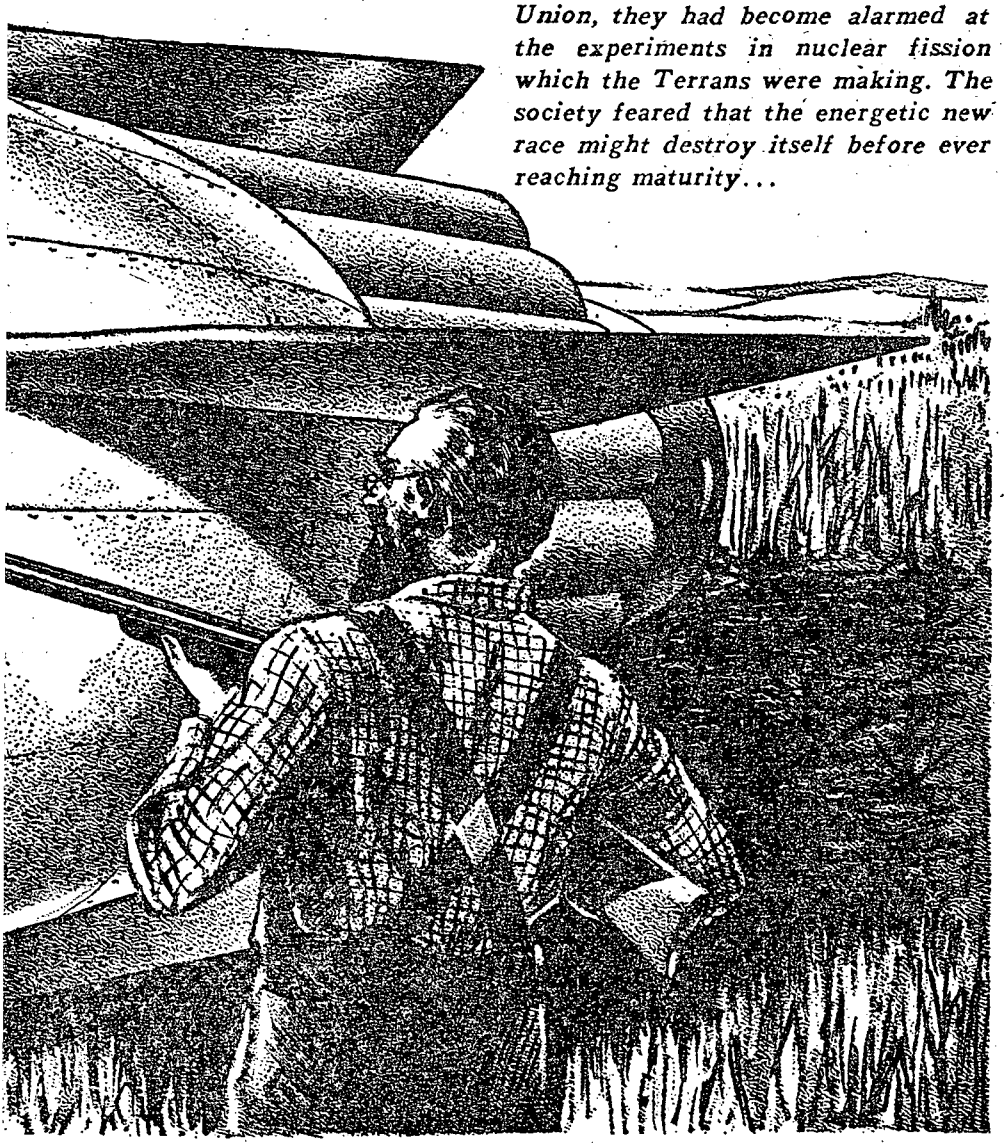
Their mission was to save Earth. But the only man they met was against "foreign entanglements!"

THE FIRST attempt on the part of members of the Galactic Union to open communication with Planet K3LT14, known to its inhabitants as Earth, or Terra, was made by a benevolent society of the Aldeberan System. Although the Aldeberans were acquainted with the fact that Terra had not as yet reached a civilization development of even DQ-14, and was, consequently, far from prepared to enter the Galactic Union, they had become alarmed at the experiments in nuclear fission which the Terrans were making. The society feared that the energetic new race might destroy itself before ever reaching maturity...



he side of the ship opened, and before his startled eyes a fantastic figure stepped forth . . .

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To begin with, I was probably feeling more crotchety than usual as a result of my trip into Harvey. Alone on the farm, and with more work than I can handle myself, I sometimes forget my bitterness; but my monthly trip to town will upset me for days afterward. Maybe I was more tolerant when I was younger and Ruth and the boys were still alive.

I'd got through my business without trouble and had stopped off in a restaurant before heading home. I should've known better. The food was cooked on an electric stove and came mostly from cans. In the corner stood a garishly painted music box, covered with neon lights that flickered the way they do until I felt my eyeballs were about to pop out. Over and over it played something about a room full of roses, and from time to time suffering patrons got up and put money into it, trying to bribe it into shutting up, I suppose; but that didn't do any good, it kept playing.

At first I thought the man sitting next to me was staring at my beard and ignored him, figuring that if he wanted to scrape his face raw with a razor every day, that was his business, but I'd leave my face the way nature planned it to be. But finally he spoke up, "You're Alex Wood, aren't you, with a farm about twenty miles out of town?"

I nodded.

He flashed me a professional smile and stuck out his hand to be shaken. So I shook it and dropped it, saying, "What're you selling?"

He laughed, the way salesmen do and explained, "My name is Brown, and my line is radio. I..."

I snorted. "I think radios ought to be taxed; wouldn't have one in my home." I went back to my food.

You'd think I'd told him I was a cannibal. "Why not?" he said. "Practically everybody..."

I stopped eating again and said patiently, like as if I was talking to a youngster, "Because, if I had a radio somebody might turn it on, and then I'd have to listen to the confounded thing. They're worse than electric lights."

He blinked and his little salesman's mustache twitched. "What's wrong with electric lights?"

I wiggled a finger at him. "They turn night into day, which automatically turns day into night; and you wind up with nothing accomplished except you've missed the best hours of the twenty four by spending the dawn in bed."

HE WRINKLED up his forehead like as if he didn't know what I was talking about but was afraid to tell me I was crazy because he still had hopes of selling me something.

I didn't bother going further. What was the use? Like nearly everybody else, he probably thought the "gifts" of science were wonderful and that we were heading for the promised land on a streamlined bus.

"I'm not interested in installing electric gadgets," I told him, and returned to the adulterated stuff they call food in town restaurants.

He was beginning to get peeved, the way they do when they see they aren't going to make a sale. "You aren't much in favor of progress, are you?" he asked, kind of nasty.

I sighed disgustedly and said, "Son, everybody's in favor of progress, just like everybody's against sin. It's all according to what you mean by the word. Now take automobiles..."

He sneered. "Well, they get you there quicker, and..."

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I sneered back. "And what do you do when you get there; anything worthwhile? For a hundred years people have been trying to 'get there quicker,' so busily that they haven't had time to figure out something worth doing when they arrive. Everybody is going lickity-split—and getting nowhere. These new thousand mile an hour airplanes can get anywhere on earth in twelve hours. But what's accomplished?"

He took a drink of his coffee, looking over the rim of his cup at me as though I didn't have good sense. "Among other things," he said, "it has military advantages."

I began to boil. "Makes it easier to kill folks, eh? Did it ever occur to you that if our scientists spent the time and money they did on the atom bomb on cancer research, there probably wouldn't be any cancer today?"

He didn't answer that, probably figuring I was too foolish to argue with. After awhile he got up and left.

All the way back to the farm, I worded over the things I could've said to him, pointing out where our modern trend is taking us. We've developed a tremendous science, but we've found no way to control it. Frankenstein's monster was one of these here juvenile delinquents compared to our scientific development. We're heading for complete destruction, unless a miracle comes along to save us—and I don't believe in miracles.

I WAS SO riled up that night, just thinking it over, that I didn't get to sleep until late. As a result, it was nearly dawn when I woke up, just in time to see the thing come down from the sky.

I sat up quickly in bed, thinking at first it was one of these here meteorites, but when it got closer, I could see I was wrong. Built something like a fat cigar, it was shooting fire from its fore end like a Fourth of July roman candle. It's speed was falling off quick, and, as it got nearer to the ground, it slowed up until, when it finally touched, it did so almost gentle.

It suddenly came to me that it'd landed right smack in the midst of my corn. I jumped from the bed, hurried into my trousers, and ran over to the closet for the shotgun. I rammed two buckshot shells into the breech and was out the door and started across the fields in less than a minute, half dressed and with my shoelaces trying to trip me up as I ran.

I could hear Betty and Beth stomping in terror in their stalls, and the chickens cutting up like as though there was a coyote in with them.

It was too much. I try to tell myself I don't mind other folks having their cars and their electric devices and even their airplanes, but when they seek me out on my isolated little farm, where I've tried so hard to escape the world, and land one of their fantastic new experiment rocket ships in my corn—

Sure enough, a good acre and more of my best golden bantam was nothing more than smoldering stubble. I strode through it wrathfully and pounded on what appeared like the thing's door with the butt of my gun.

I still can't say whether it would be proper to call it an airplane. It was considerable larger than any such craft I'd ever seen. But, then, I'm not much up on such things, and I understand the government is spend-

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ing billions of dollars on the making of such hellish devices, and at such a rate hardly anybody can keep up with all the new flying machines.

It must've reached nearly a hundred feet into the air. Its wings, if that's what you could call them, were short and stubby. The metal—I guess it was metal—on the outside had a queer shimmering look, something like an old mirror that's had a considerable amount of the mercury stuff on its back dislocated. In spite of all the flame it had been shooting out, it didn't seem to be hot. I reached out gingerly with a finger and touched its side; it felt cool.

I thumped on the door again, still boiling mad. As poor as I am, this contraption of "progress" had to destroy more than half my sweet corn crop.

The door didn't open, and I half walked, half stumbled, around the thing. It was as big as a small barn. I couldn't help but wonder how it ever got up into the air. What a sample of man's ability! If he only was able to turn his genius to real advancement instead of these here instruments of war and uncontrolled industrial development and its natural result, international trade rivalry, depressions, and all the rest.

BY THE TIME I'd circled the big airship, the door had begun to open up, real slow. When a crack finally appeared there was a sudden whoosh of air, like as though there'd been more pressure inside than outside. I stood there watching, my shotgun under my arm, my lungs almost busting with the want to read them the riot act.

Suddenly the door swung free, and there they were, three of them staring down at me.

Maybe my scorn of men who'll make war their profession, even in times of peace, colored my outlook too much, but it seemed to me they were the most strange appearing specimens in the half light of morning that I've ever seen. Even their clothes were queer, but I guess that's due to the special uniforms aviators have to wear when they go up in these complicated new rocket airplanes. These wore the most confounded garments I ever laid eyes on.

I glared at them, real belligerent, waiting for some kind of apology. Not that I was expecting to accept it anyways. I was ready to tell them off plenty.

The first of them, the commanding officer, I guess, stared at me a full minute before saying anything. He was a tall man, not a hair on his head, and his eyes were more bright than ordinary. He looked out of place, to me, like as though he was really a dreamer, not one who'd spend his life working on rocket propelled super-bombers, to kill off his fellow man.

He said finally, "Greetings. This is Terra, is it not?"

A foreigner!

You could tell from the way he talked. He had the heaviest accent I ever heard. I've always thought it was bad enough that the government puts thousand of Americans to work figuring out new ways of killing folks, but that they should hire foreign experts also is too much.

I never heard of the town of Terra. I snorted, still holding myself in check. "This is Harvey, North Dakota, or leastways, just twenty miles out." I was about to light into them then, but they threw me off by putting their heads together and jabbering away in some foreign language.

Finally, the leader turned back to

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me again and said, "We are from Borl, in the Aldeberan System, and bring you the greetings and well wishes of..."

It was then that I began to boil over. "So you're *all* foreigners! At first I thought you were some American experiment airplane, but now I see I was wrong. You're foreign military people, ships like this aren't ever built for peaceable purpose. You come here in your big, fast flying bomber, pretending being peaceful and friendly. Probably next year you'll come back for another visit, carrving these here atom bombs."

HE TRIED to stop me, but I went on, blood rushing to my head as I roared. "You come down blasting away with your hellish ship of destruction, scaring my stock half to death, ruining my best sweet corn, and then you have the consarned gall..."

I don't think he understood more than half of what I was yelling, but he interrupted again before I could catch my breath.

"You don't understand," he said, scowling a little bit. "We have come to give you the advice and guidance of a more advanced people..."

That was his story, but even if it was the truth and not just more of this here propaganda stuff, I was still hopping mad.

"Advice," I yelled at him. "Advice! Keep your consarned advice! I been getting more crazy advice from Washington than I know what to do with, without some wiseacre foreigners starting in. How to plant, what to plant, when to plant, how to fertilize, how to put in electricity, how to do this and that, and the other thing. And then what happens? First they teach you how to grow tremendous big crops, and then a depression comes along and they make you destroy them. How many potatoes to pour kerosene on, what crops to plow under, what pigs to shoot, what fruit trees to chop down!"

Everything of the past forty years kind of flashed in front of me. All the results of their quick growing science and their lack of knowing what to do with it. Their producing more and more products with their new machines, but not having places enough to sell it all. And the whole thing finally blowing up with wars over colonies and sources of raw materials and oil, and markets to dump their surplus manufactured goods. I thought of the loss of Johnny in the first war, and of Cris in the second, and of Ruth's death by cancer; and I knew their crazy science is still growing and growing and a sane way of using the things it discovers, is yet to be figured out. And I knew they're preparing for the next war just as fast as ever possible. Their science be hanged!

Finally I stopped for breath.

The commander of the group was beginning to get pretty pale with anger himself by this time. "Such indignity," he said. "Haven't you considered the fact that we've gone to endless difficulty in making this journey here and in studying your fantastic language by using your radio emanations? And then to land on your barbarian..."

That got me going again. I was mad, too wrought up to make sense in what I was saying, but I yelled back as loud as I could. "Fantastic language! Who told you you could talk it? It's all a man can do to understand your jibber-jabber. And what do you mean, barbarian? The real savages are you professional sol-

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diers and you scientists who work at death dealing machines."

I realized I was talking so loud and so fast that probably he couldn't understand me, so I slowed down. *"If you don't like this country, why don't you go back where you came from?"* I yelled real clear.

HE STARED at me for a long time without saying anything. "That seems an excellent suggestion," he said finally. "Obviously, we made a mistake in coming at all." His eyes gleamed almost unhuman-like, he was so mad, and he slammed the door. I could hear the cogs working inside it again, making it air-tight.

I remembered what the blast from its exhausts, or whatever it was, had done to my corn, so I dashed back to get out of the way. A few minutes later the big airship flashed all different color flame from its bottom, and lifted sluggish-like from the ground. It gained speed slowly, then faster, then, with a roar, it streaked up and disappeared into the sky. It was a terrible thing to watch, something like a skyrocket, I thought. A youngster's toy, developed into an instrument of war that could destroy cities in a few minutes.

I plodded back to the house, exhausted; knowing myself for the old, tired, disillusioned and bitter man that I am. Only a miracle could save this world of ours from destruction—and I don't believe in miracles.

* * *

...Unfortunately, the Aldeberan expedition was a failure, being received with open hostility and belligerence. At the time, some criticism was made of the group's leader, on the grounds that he had left Terra after being influenced adversely by but one inhabitant of the backward planet. Be that as it may, Terra was not visited again until two hundred decals later, following several atomic wars. There were no members of the species homo sapiens left by then.

—From the Encyclopedia Galactica

HOPE!

★ By Carter T. Wainwright ★

THE LINE moved forward slowly. McClary tensed. He had three more ahead of him.

An icy bead of sweat rolled down his temple even though the day was cool.

The man ahead of him was fumbling with his papers. He handed them serviley to the flat-faced Mongoloid sitting at the improvised desk. The soldier flipped through them.

"No good," he looked up at the man before McClary. A slight gesture, a rapid-fire barrage of sing-song words, and two soldiers led the man away.

Oh no, God, McClary thought, don't let them stop me. Please. If they search me...he left the thought unfinished.

"Paper?" the Mongoloid officer barked.

McClary handed him a thin sheaf of documents. He could feel the drawings around his waist crinkle and in his imagination the sound was audible. He bit his lip.

No one had imagined defeat could be anything like this. It just was not conceivable. But it was. Now to get into Frisco required signatures and papers—and luck. The Mongoloids had the country in an iron grip and they were suppressing the underground movements ruthlessly.

Carelessly, the officer flung the papers back to McClary.

Without a word, he took them. When he walked through the roadblock, McClary breathed freely.

He walked down the streets—Frisco hadn't taken much of a pulverizing, though Los Angeles was a shambles. That was before the Surrender.

Now, thought McClary, the thing is going to change. As soon as I get these plans to the underground headquarters, the Mongoloids are going to find a different world.

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As he walked along he thought about how easily he had gone through the road-block. That was funny—they must have been aware of the alarms.

It took him three hours to get to the house on old Fenter street and the boys received him with open arms. The ultra-radio had pulsed the message. He had the Weapon!

They didn't give McClary a chance to rest. The papers were out and in the machine of the deceptive-appearing house the tools started to hum. Five hours after he arrived, McClary had the Weapon thrust into his hands.

McClary hefted the crude, bell-mouthed weapon lovingly. This was his destiny. He hadn't fought in the War but this was the most important element to come out of it—and it was going to mean the end of the Mongoloids. With all their atomic weapons they'd be helpless before the disintegrating blasts of energy from the innocent hydrogen capsule.

The shop below was humming with activity as the boys went to work on production. Build a few dozen of the simple machines and cut their way through the city. Single handed they could drive the Asiatics into the sea—and they knew it.

Levy turned from the window.

"You'll get your chance, gang," he said. "The patrols have got the joint surrounded. Brother, this better be good!"

McClary shrugged. "I thought they let me through too easy. They figured on making a grand haul. Well, they're going to."

Nonchalantly, he walked over to the window. Armored cars, tanks, trucks, soldiers—the full panoply of Mongoloid glory were moving in orderly circles around the house.

McClary watched an officer—his golden suns showed him to be a colonel—walking toward the entrance to demand surrender.

The physicist nonchalantly opened the two windows of the second story room. No one said a word.

He raised the innocuous-looking funnel-mouthed tool to waist-height and leveled it out the window.

He touched the crude switch on the side.

There was a slight buzz. Nothing changed in the house. But within a radius of five hundred feet—there was nothing! Literally nothing. Men and machines and houses and streets disintegrated. As a child plays with a toy gun, so McClary swept his weapon around and the ensuing holocaust—was not even that. The only sound was the rush of air to fill the vacuum.

Open-mouthed the rebels stood around McClary.

"Is it good enough?" he asked, a wry, amused smile on his tired face. "Do you think we'll clear the country now?"

There was awed silence, the silence of reverence...

SYNTHETIC AGE

☆ By Jon Barry ☆

"SHOE-LEATHER" doesn't mean too much these days. Back in the "honest old days" you knew that you had some cowhide under your soles. But times have changed. Synthetic rubber and plastic materials are being used more and more in clothing—including shoes. And that isn't bad, because the synthetic materials are usually better for the purpose than the natural ones.

Nylon has replaced silk; synthetic rubber has replaced natural rubber; glass and plastics are replacing natural fabrics. The average person today—particularly women—wear a high proportion of synthetic clothing. And, we might add, they look terrific! The process is speeding up.

A hundred years from now, nature will supply hardly any clothing or wearing apparel. Most of it will come out of the test tube. Is this bad? Far from it, because what man can imagine, he can create. If he needs a tough, long wearing material, he manufactures it. If he needs a flexible material, he manufactures it. If he wants a blonde, he—oops!—not yet. Let's hope that the blonde of the future won't be a test tube product...

GASSY NETWORK

☆ By L. A. Burt ☆

THE U.S. is criss-crossed with a network of electric power lines, so arranged that one public utility can help supply another during a shortage, even so far as several states away. This miracle of integration, this close linking of the country into a single unified oneness, is an impressive and imposing tribute to our industrial skill.

Aiding and abetting this linkage is the new phenomenon of pipelines. Primarily one thinks of oil pipes, lacing the country. While these are unquestionably important, even more so is the vast network of natural and manufactured gas lines which cover the U.S. from one end to another.

Trillions of cubic feet of gas are conveyed over these "underground highways" every year and the demand, insatiable now, is growing. As coal is gradually being displaced as the nation's major fuel source by gas and oil, so eventually may atomic power plants displace coal and oil and gas, but until then, the two latter energy sources are going to flow across the country through tens of thousands of miles of steel pipe. These pipelines, with their associated pumping stations are symphonies of modern industrial design.

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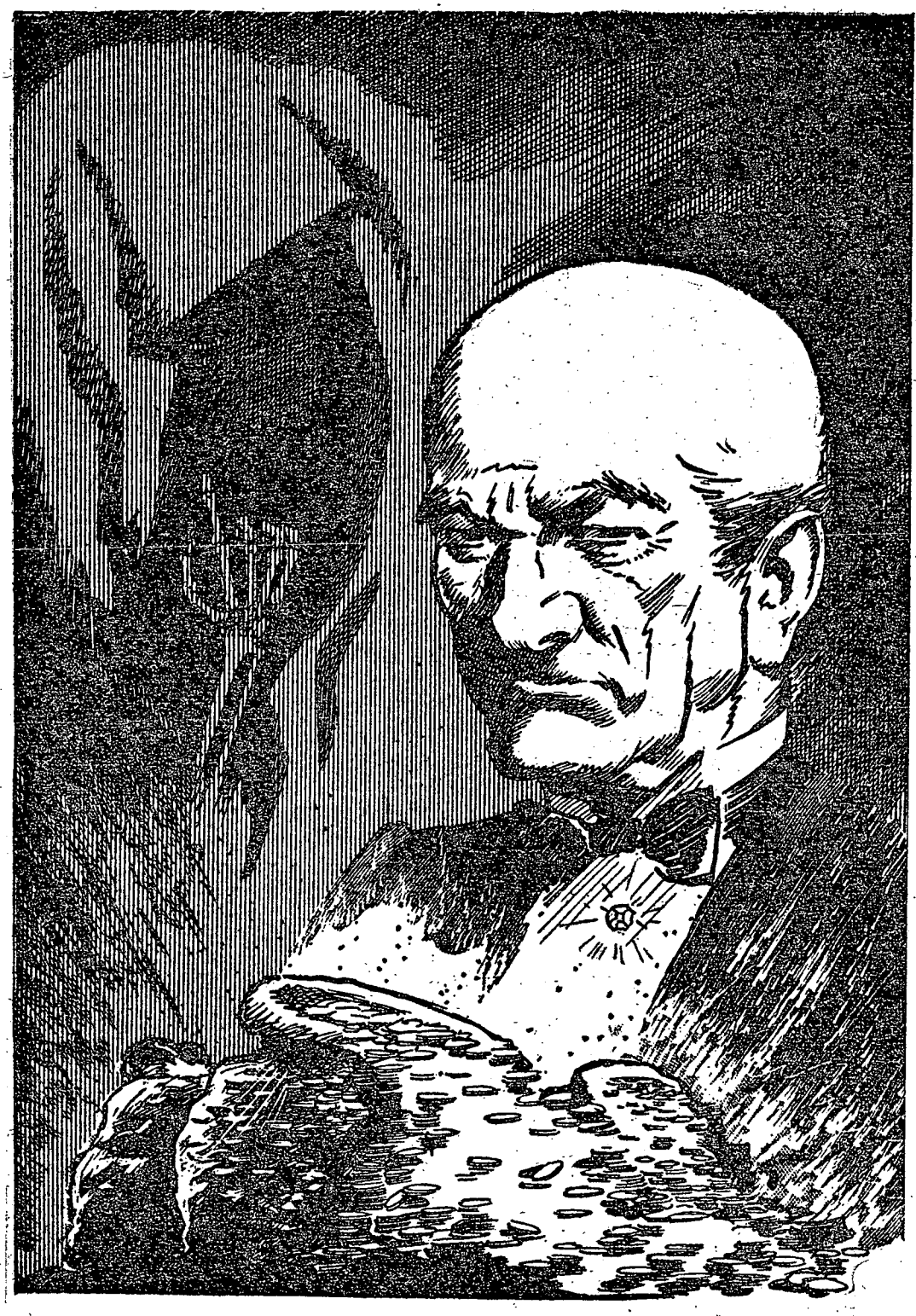

Wealth and life were piled before him, but off to the side a grim spectre beckoned . . .

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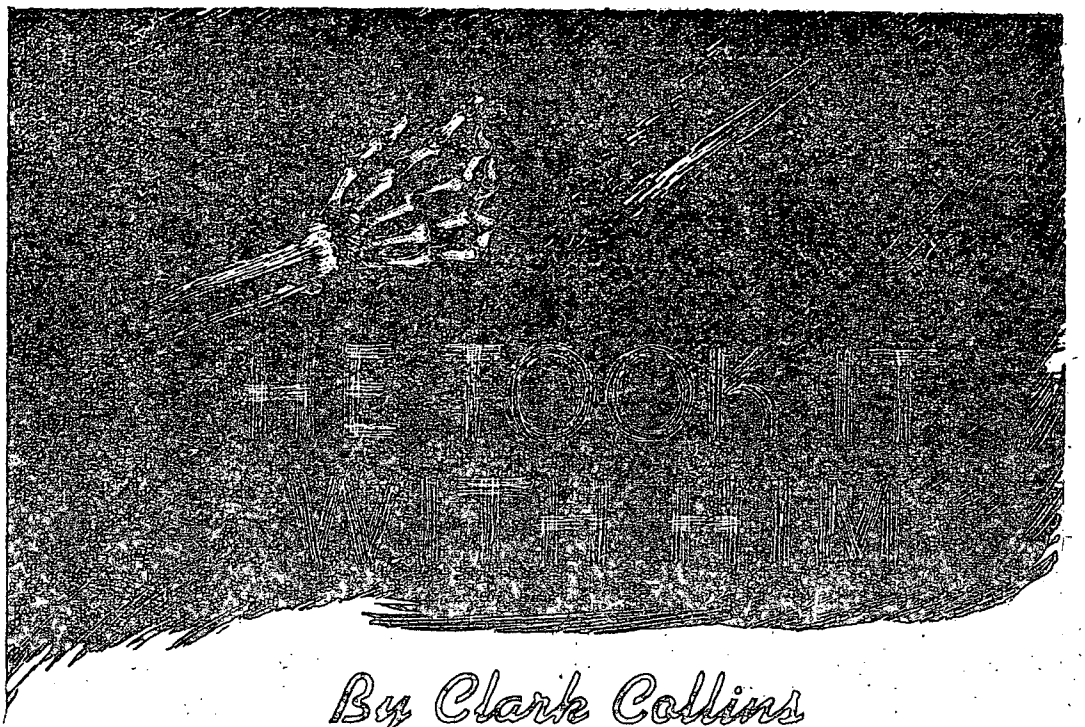

By Clark Collins

He could see no point in making millions, only to leave it to others when the time came to die. So he did something about it!

HE SAT in his chair silently for a long time after the doctor had left. One year. He didn't doubt Grayson's analysis of his health, he knew the man hated his guts—so did everyone else for that matter—but the physician was the best medical science could provide. Besides, he'd had every top authority on the disease in the country—he amended that, in the world—for consultation.

Matt Bently opened a drawer of his desk and brought out a battered silver dollar. He regarded it reflectively, recalling the circumstances under which it had been acquired. Then the long years since, the striving, the fighting, the skullduggery, the heartlessness, the bribing, yes, the actual thieving.

His grin was a grimace. "I still say it'll buy anything. *Anything.*"

He rang for his secretary.

* * *

Bently scowled at the man before him. "My time is very limited, for reasons that you'll soon learn, so I'll cut this as short as possible.

"You're Professor Dumaine and your ambition for the past ten years has been to build an institution dedicated to pure research. An institute, in short, that could continue its work without hindrance from government or industrialist. Science for

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science's sake, I think was the way some newspaperman put it." Matt Bently sneered.

The physicist shrugged. "There've been less noble ambitions, I trust. For instance, the amassing of the largest fortune in the world at the cost of friends betrayed, governments corrupted, men, women and children crushed, wars provoked..."

Bently's smile was wolfish. "You make one mistake, Professor. I've never betrayed a friend, since I've never had one. It's going to be difficult for you to serve such a man, isn't it?"

Andre Dumaine got to his feet and reached for his hat. He looked at the international financier grimly. "Not hard, impossible. Good day, Mr. Bently. It's a mystery to me why I let your secretary talk me into coming here in the first place."

Matt Bently still smiled. He shook his head and reached down into the desk drawer to bring out the battered dollar. "Do you see this, Dumaine? I found long ago that it was a wonderful substitute for friends. It will buy anything, even men like Professor Andre Dumaine."

It was the other's turn to smile "No, Mr. Bently. You just haven't tried to buy Andre Dumaine before. My work prevents me from making too thorough a study of world affairs but I am aware enough of current events to know that you, and a handful of men like yourself, are rushing the race toward a new conflict which may completely destroy it. Under no circumstances could I serve such a man."

Bently flipped the coin back into his desk. "It's just a matter of how many you offer," he said easily. "For instance, Professor, I'm offering you one hundred millon of them."

The physicist's eyebrows went up. "Are you insane? For what?"

"To build your research institute."

THE OTHER laughed scornfully, but there was tension in his voice. "You forget that I am interested in science for science's sake, Mr. Bently. My institution will either be free from all influence or it will never be built. Even your hundred millions don't attract me when I realize that your sinister figure would dominate the institute's work."

The tycoon got up from his chair and walked to a window. "It might interest you to know that my doctor gives me approximately one year to live," he said over his shoulder.

There was a pregnant silence.

The scientist said slowly, "Then you mean you actually desire to will a hundred million dollars to my project, and in no manner will control the spending of the sum?"

Matt Bently turned, his voice held a sneer again. "One small string, Professor. But I want to ask some questions first."

The physicist's face hardened, and the billionaire laughed scornfully. "Don't let me frighten you. All I want is for the institute to take care of my grave."

Professor Dumaine frowned, and said warily, "If you are sincere about this it means a good deal to me."

"Of course. Sit down, Professor." The man who controlled a dozen governments returned to his own chair. "Now, first of all, will man ever attain immortality?"

"You mean life after death?" Dumaine was puzzled.

Bently flicked a hand impatiently. "I'm an atheist, Professor. I mean, will science ever discover the secret of eternal life?"

"Oh." The Professor thought it over, his forehead wrinkled. Finally,

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"It's out of my line, of course, but I would say yes. Possibly not in our time, but eventually science will probably discover the causes of death and eliminate them. You wouldn't exactly call it discovering the secret of eternal life."

"It amounts to the same thing." Matt Bently's eyes gleamed. "How soon?"

"How in the world should I know?"

The most hated man in the world snarled. "Guess! My granting you the hundred million is dependent on your answer."

Dumaine submerged the resentment this domineering egoist inspired. "Possibly within a hundred years, given a continuation of man's development at the present rate and barring a return to a new dark ages such as might be brought on by future wars. I would say definitely within two hundred years."

"Good. That isn't too long a time. I assume that by then we'll have conquered all diseases that presently plague man, including mine?"

The Professor nodded.

"Then I can assume further that if I were alive two hundred years from now I could be cured and insured eternal life?"

"I suppose so, but I fail to see what connection this could have with the proposed institute."

Matt Bently took a thick cigar from his desk humidor, without offering one to his visitor, bit off the end and lit it. He took the first breath of smoke into his mouth with satisfaction.

"I intend to endow the institute in such a manner that it will be perpetuated indefinitely. The only requirement will be that it take care of my body until such time as science will have advanced to the point where the corpse can be revived and I brought back to life."

The professor stared at him. "Good Lord, man, you're insane."

He drew on his cigar again. "If so, it's worth a hundred million to your pet project. I've been a gambler all my life, Dumaine. I'm betting everything I've amassed on this."

HE LAUGHED grimly. "The percentages are with me. If I lose, I lose nothing, since I will already be dead. If I win, I win everything...eternal life. Now tell me, if you were interested in preparing my body in such a manner that the doctors of the future would have a chance to revive it, what would you do?"

"The scheme is fantastic!"

The tycoon didn't answer but sat silently, smoking his cigar with satisfaction.

The physicist ran his hand nervously through his hair and down the back of his neck. "I suppose that the best thing would be to take the body immediately after death, quick freeze it, and place it in as near a complete vacuum as possible. If ever science develops to the point where the dead can be revived, I should imagine that such preparations would give the fewest handicaps."

Matt Bently nodded with satisfaction. "Get to work on it immediately. In six months' time, I'll want the arrangements finished. You can begin today to plan your institute. Remember, the only provision I hold you to, is that my coffin be kept in such a manner that when science has progressed far enough to revive me, my corpse will be available and in suitable condition."

"It might take five hundred years —or longer!"

"Then we must establish the institute in such a manner that it will survive for that length of time. Now,

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I'm a busy man, endless arrangements to make. See my secretary on your way out, he has an initial check for you. Get to work, Dumaine."

IN SIX months the disease had eaten far into even the dynamic Matt Bently but his plans were working out on schedule as usual. There was but one more major arrangement to be made.

He eyed the world famous authority before him with the old fire. "Daren, I know it's practically impossible for you damned economists to say anything without piling ifs, ands, and buts, around your statements. I'm asking you to cut it out today. I want straight answers, not the rot you customarily hand out in your newspaper columns."

The other said dryly, "You're paying for my time handsomely, Mr. Bently. Fire away."

Matt Bently snorted, then coughed hollowly into his handkerchief. "First of all, suppose I had discovered some manner of traveling into the future five hundred years. What would be the most valuable thing I could take with me into that period?"

Paul Daren stared at him. "That's really a difficult question." He mused for a long moment. "Probably art objects. Or, possibly, some ultra-rare element, say, radium."

"Not gold? Not diamonds?" The billionaire seemed surprised.

"Definitely not diamonds. I've no doubt that within the comparatively near future diamonds will be artificially produced and, consequently, cheap. Gold?" he shrugged. "Possibly in five hundred years we'll have transmutation of metals. But, even if not, we can't be sure that gold will be the medium of exchange, or, even, that there will be a medium of exchange such as we think of it today. It's according to the type of social system we have by then."

"What do you mean by that?" Bently asked irritatedly.

"Five hundred years ago the most advanced nations of the world were living under a feudalistic form of government. Today capitalism is prevalent. What will it be in five hundred years is debatable to say the least."

Matt Bently stirred restlessly. He didn't like this. "What are the alternatives?"

"There are several," the other said carefully. "Given a continuation of the policies of the *cartel* controlled by Matt Bently and his associates, we might have an atomic war or two and the human race might well be driven back to feudalism, or, even further, back to chattel slavery, or barbarism..."

Bently snarled, "I didn't bring you here to hear you lecture me, Daren. Besides, you don't know what you're talking about. In the past six months I've liquidated all my holdings. At the present time I control nothing but cash. And a good deal of that," he added with satisfaction.

The economist went on cooly. "You asked for the alternatives, I'm giving them to you. I can't guarantee that my answers will make you happy."

"Go on!"

"We might see our present social system give way to Stateism, which we see rapidly developing even today in various forms, the Soviet, for instance, in one manner, England, in another. Or there is DeLeonism, or Marxian Socialism in its most advanced form; or Industrial Feudalism, which has various possibilities including Technocracy. Of course, there's an x-factor here. Possibly an unknown will come along, but I'm inclined to think that any society of the future will be at most a vari-

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ation of one of these.

"Any private property, especially wealth, that you took forward with you in this fanciful travel to the future, would do you little good unless the social system was some form of Stateism, or, possibly, Industrial Feudalism. Even then, you couldn't be sure that you'd retain it."

After the economist had gone, Matt Bently rang for his secretary. He spoke to the man dully, contemptuously.

"Rogers, I want you to locate every Rembrandt in the world that might possibly be for sale. Price is no object. Also get complete data on the world supply of radium. I'll want to corner the market..." He paused "You'd better also make preliminary arrangements for the purchase of several millions worth of gold bullion, and investigate the possibility of securing some of the largest of the world's diamonds."

"Just to play safe," he added under his breath.

The secretary bobbed his head nervously and scooted from the room.

The sick man leaned back painfully and allowed himself a grimace of satisfaction. "I'll have to find several spots where I can have constructed secret vaults that'll remain hidden and safe for five centuries," he told himself.

He took out his silver dollar and eyed it sourly. "Wait until my relatives find that only a few thousand dollars will be left of my fortune when I die." His laugh was bitter.

"So, *you can't take it with you,* eh? We'll see."

THE DARKNESS dropped away slowly, and consciousness returned bit by bit, fitfully. Waves of nausea swept over him and he sank into blackness again.

The next time the return was less fitful. He became dimly aware of light, faint and yellow, but light. The nausea was more intense. His soul screamed to escape back into the empty dark.

A thought came into his dull mind. *"You are sick, perhaps I can remedy that."*

The nausea dropped away. He slept. After nearly four centuries of eternal sleep, he awoke, to sleep again.

When he became conscious once more, he waited for long moments before opening his eyes. A sudden fear flooded over him. Perhaps this return to life would be partial. Perhaps some of his senses had died forever; his hearing, his taste, his speech, his touch, *his eyes!*

He opened them suddenly and groaned with relief to feel the blazing hurt of sunlight. He narrowed his eyelids until he became used to the brightness, then opened them slowly. He was in a large, white, ceilingless room. Alone.

It suddenly occurred to him that his vision was perfect in spite of the fact that he wore no glasses. He felt the goodness of perfect health in his body and suddenly realized that these physicians of the future had cured *all* of his ills. He raised his left hand and stared at the finger which a childhood accident had prevented him from bending for forty years. It bent again. It seemed the greatest miracle of all. He clasped and unclasped his fist, wonderingly.

A thought came to him. *"I sense you are awake, Matt Bently. Forgive me for not being present. We thought it more practical for you to be alone at first and until some explanations were made."*

He didn't know what to say. He recognized that he was being contacted through mental telepathy.

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Finally, "What year is this?" He spoke aloud, not sure that the question would be heard.

"I'm afraid you wouldn't understand our present calendar. But, using the one in use in your day, it is roughly 2350 A.D."

He remained silent, assimilating that. Unable to think of anything further to say.

"I suggest you eat, and rest again," the thought said. *"When you are stronger and your mind used to the shock of awakening, I will visit you."*

He noticed for the first time the table beside the bed. A bowl of thick soup steamed. He reached for the spoon, obediently.

When Matt Bently awoke again he felt the thought almost immediately. *"You are rested."*

It was more a statement than a question, but he answered, "Wonderfully, I feel better than I can ever remember." He swung his feet over the side of the bed and stood up gingerly. He was surprised to find himself able to walk with ease. He'd thought he'd be stiff for a time.

There was a comfortable chair in one corner of the room. He made his way to it and relaxed in its depths with satisfaction. He smiled triumphantly.

"Made it," he said to himself. "2350 A.D."

The thought said, *"The Bently Institute is as pleased as you are yourself, Matt Bently. Your revival has been a great challenge to us."*

He said with satisfaction, "Then this is still the Bently Institute which I founded nearly four hundred years ago."

"The world has always been proud and grateful for this contribution on your part, Matt Bently. Verily, the All Highest has said that sacrifice for the good of the race is the greatest honor achievable."

"Ummm,... of course," he muttered. So they still had religion. That was a good sign as far as he was concerned. The Matt Bentlys of life thrived among the gullible.

"How doubly honored that you should live again and be able to sacrifice again."

"How's that?"

"You have brought a treasure from the past that is of immense value, Matt Bently."

HIS LIPS drew back. So! He'd struck pay dirt with at least one of his hidden vaults. He'd have to handle this carefully. He wondered what it was, the diamonds, the art objects, the gold, the radium? Whatever it was, it sounded as though they were anxious to get hold of it.

He'd better hedge. "Why the long distance mental telepathy? Can't we get together on this?" If they thought he was going to 'sacrifice' anything, willing, they had another thought coming.

"A bit later, Matt Bently. A great deal has happened since your... death."

He remembered what the economist had told him. "Such as what?" he asked cautiously.

"Briefly. The first of three atomic wars broke out shortly after your demise. Before they were over, nearly all life was swept from the planet. All of homo sapiens was destroyed."

"WHAT?"

"All mankind was destroyed as a result of the atomic wars."

"But...I don't understand. Who are...What are you...?" A cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

The thought gave an impression of gentleness, pity. *"That is why we have not let you see us as yet, Matt Bently. Perhaps our unfamiliar appearance would distress you. The*

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atomic wars led to many mutations. Let us say that the present dominant race of earth combines all the more desirable attributes of homo sapiens with those of such other forms or life such as the ant and the bee. Meanwhile, we strive endlessly to improve still further. Experimentation on ourselves has enabled us to achieve wonders in developing the species. Verily, the All Highest has blessed many with the opportunity to sacrifice for the benefit of the race."

A feeling of horror was growing within him. He stuttered, "This great treasure that you mentioned my bringing from the past. Which did you mean, the radium, the Rembrandts, the gold, the diamonds..?"

"These things you mention have no value today, Matt Bently."

"THEN WHAT DID YOU MEAN?" He was shouting now. "WHAT TREASURE DID I BRING FROM THE PAST?"

"Why, your body, Matt Bently. For three hundred years our scientists haven't had the opportunity to work upon a living homo sapiens specimen. No one now alive has ever dissected a man. Your sacrifice will enable us to add tremendously to our store of knowledge. Undoubtedly, the race will be improved as a result of what we learn. Verily, the All Highest..."

He screamed in madness.

THE CHILLY VISITOR

☆ By William Karney ☆

PROFESSOR Wilson stooped and picked the peculiar-looking rock of the snow and muck. Holding the dirty thing gingerly he opened the basement door and walked in.

He thought it odd that the lump of rock had such a funny, almost slimy feel, but he didn't think twice about it. It looked at a casual glance like a piece of meteoric iron, but Jimmy had probably picked it up while playing in the neighboring lot. Well, he thought, kids get attached to the damndest things. If Jimmy wants it, let him have it.

He stamped up stairs, shaking the snow from him as he went.

And on the casual lump of rock, the slimy leathery, colorless piece of protoplasm stirred and slowly came to life, as the warmth of the cellar penetrated its curious gelatinous structure.

Instinctively it sought the source of the heat, and its still sluggish brain recognized the strange machine which furnished it. In a combination of extension and relaxation it moved over the cold concrete and sought safe refuge near a maze of metal tubes which led into the heat-machine...

Wilson sat down to examine the current mail and in a short while he was comfortably settled, cigarette and drink supplying the atmosphere of comfort which the outdoors belied.

Presently he began to stir a little. The room seemed to be a little too warm, he became aware suddenly. For a moment he forgot it, but with increasing insistence the temperature disturbed him.

"Umph," he grunted in surprise as he stared at the thermometer on the thermostat. It was ninety-five in the room. The furnace must be stuck. A quick glance at the thermostat showed it to be clear.

"Damn!" he muttered angrily as he clumped down the basement stairs. "I had the thing cleaned two months ago. Last time I call them!"

The intelligence now alert, clamped itself around the odd mechanism tighter, and surveyed its situation, trying to orient itself with respect to this strange new world. Consciousness and awareness had existed so long ago...life had worked at a slow ebb for such a long time...his crime hadn't been that great to deserve the exile...

Wilson strode over to the furnace and opened the door. The flame was roaring brightly even though the thermostat called for no heat. At the same time, the intelligence wrapped around the valve-mechanism saw the source of increased warmth. Instinctively, without waiting to consider it moved in a slithery motion through the open door—and vanished in a puff of disintegrated protoplasm...

Professor Wilson thought he saw a flicker, but who notices such trivia. The flame suddenly died down as the valve was released.

Two hours later, Professor Wilson told his wife, "Alice, I can't understand the furnace. It acted up this afternoon for no reason at all. If it happens again, call Acme, will you? Those things can be dangerous." Dangerous...Indeed...

★ ★ ★

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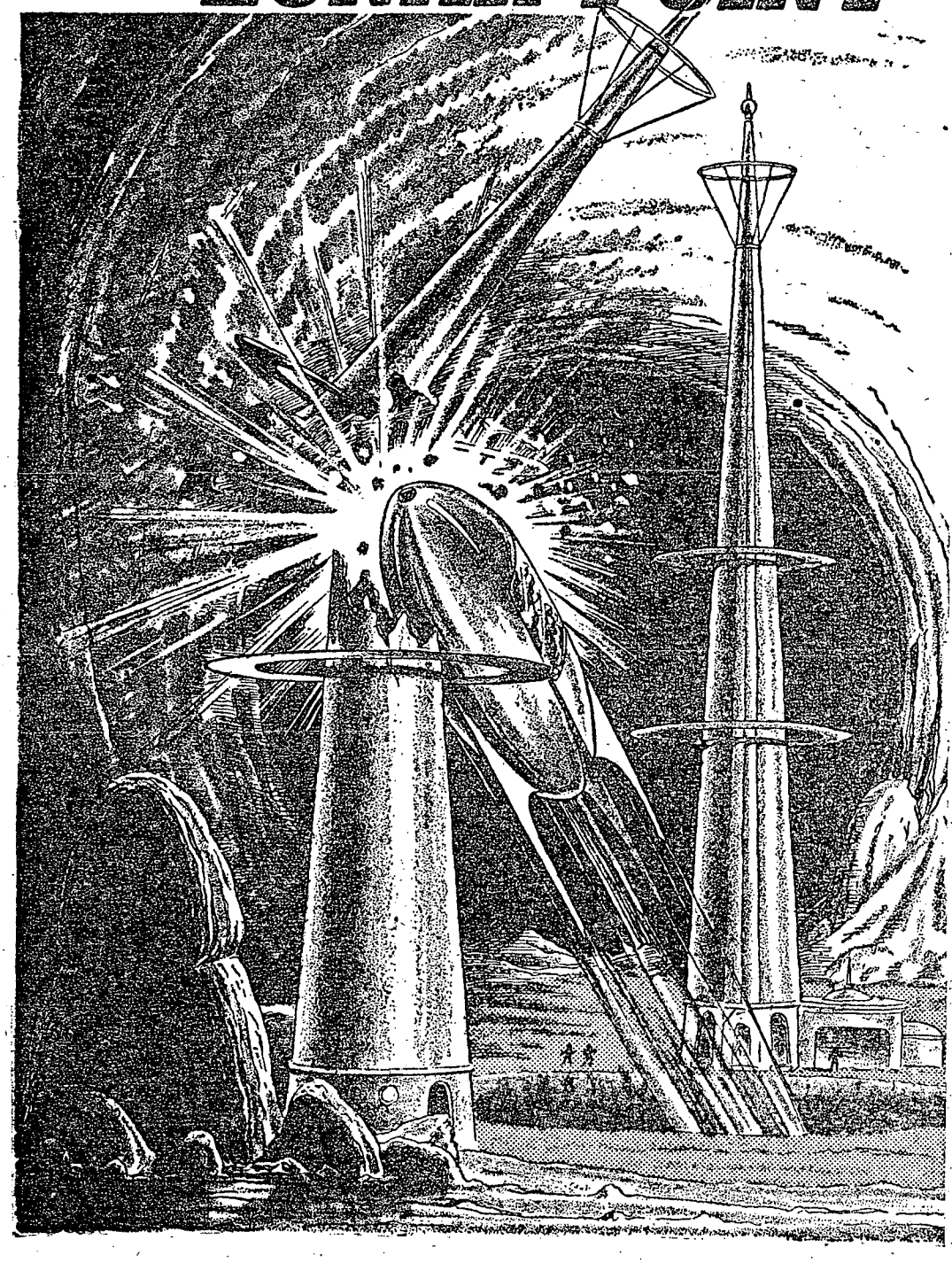
The LUNAR POINT



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# of VIEW

By S. M. Tenneshaw

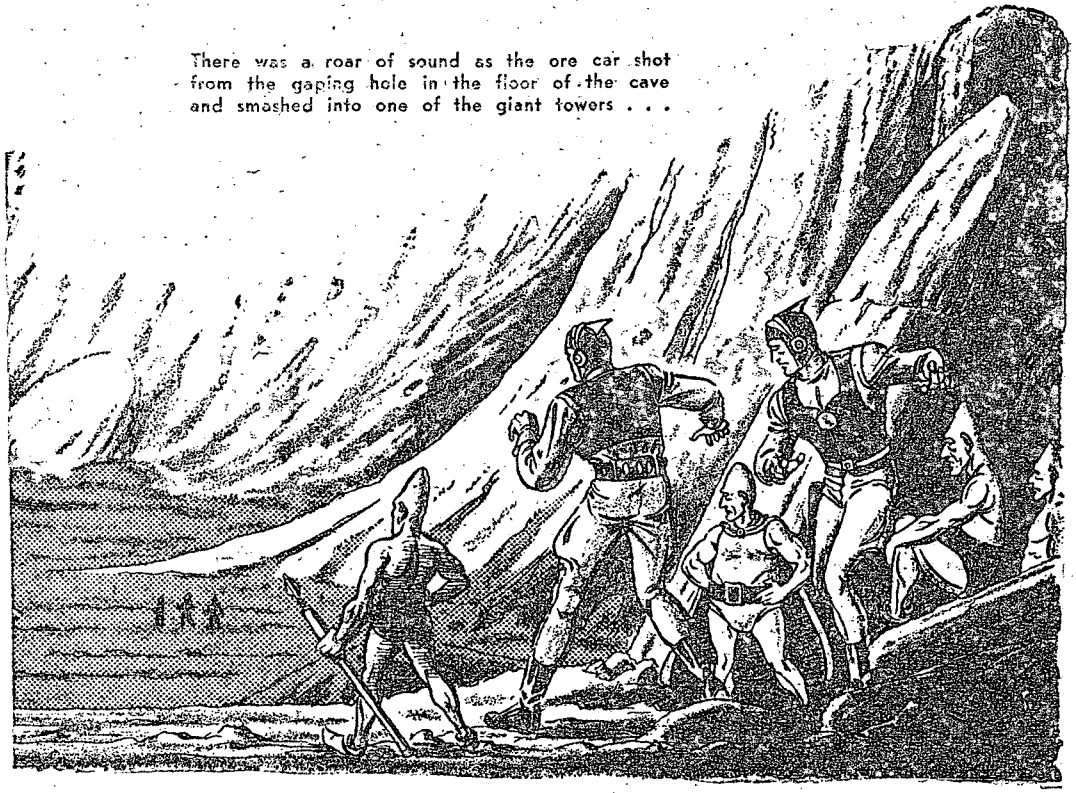
Earthmen fought for control of the Lunar Mines, while the Moon People waited patiently — waiting to reward the loser! . . .

EARTHLIGHT made the lunar plain a vast pool of brilliance. Beneath the high bright rims of the craters canyons twisted wildly, and lava flows threw highlights of eerie brilliance from their fire polished edges.

Jon Dyke, in his cumbrous space suit, threw the petcock open that let the last tank of oxygen into his suit. Here, in the base of the crater, he must make contact with the Mocs—and soon—his oxygen was getting low.

He paused for an instant, looking down from the rim of the crater at weird shapes below him, rising out of the plain like fantastic dragons out of the sea. It stirred something inside him, yet he was unable to put a word to the emotion. He was able to put few feelings into words. He wondered again, briefly, with the oxygen petcock in his fingers, what had possessed him to undertake a mission for which he was so unsuited.

Standing so, in the eerie earthlight, ghosts seemed to stand beside



There was a roar of sound as the ore car shot from the gaping hole in the floor of the cave and smashed into one of the giant towers . . .

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him, whispering in his ears. There was his superior, president of Galactic Spaceways, saying, "You're a fool, Jon! Look at your personality figgures: mental index nine, personality index two. No wonder you are our best research physicist. Leave adventure to the extrovertive indices. Forget this wild idea." There was too a woman's voice, Dawn Shane's voice, saying scornfully, "You're just a machine, with your atoms and ergs. You don't know what the world really is, or what people are like. You never will, as long as you stay in the shell of your mind."

For an instant her face lived before him, deep turquoise eyes blazing into his, red lips below them in a tiny heart shaped face. He wondered again, briefly, what would have happened if he had followed his impulse, and kissed her then.

Of course he hadn't, he was too shy. But her words corroded his mind till he had insisted on undertaking this omission.

For a moment his ears heard the hiss of the oxygen as it filtered into his suit, for a moment he wondered, panicky, if it was enough, if it would last till he made contact with the Mocs.

Then the thought vanished in his fear of meeting the Mocs. Not that he had a physical fear, but the thought of meeting a strange race, of trying to express himself before them, or conversing with them. He groaned— Mental index nine, Personality index two. Almost as much intelligence, far above the norm, and a personality index way up there.

This was the man Jon had to beat. If Galactic Spaceways was to establish the first base on Luna he would have to convince the mutant Mocs, who dominated the satellite, that such outer world communication was desirable. Not only that, but that Galactic Spaceways were the only logical builders of Lunar Spaceport One.

Null Nevins would be doing the same thing for Terran Rocket Lines. Null, with his big, likeable face, and personality index nine.

Jon had to outsell Null Nevins. He thought bitterly, "What a salesman I'll make—Personality index two."

And then he saw the Moc.

It stood in the bottom of the crater, below him, a little hunched forward, on many jointed legs. It was smaller than he was, about the size of a collie dog. It stood looking up at him, waiting for him to descend.

Jon set his lips in a grim, thin line, and hurried down the slope.

THE MOCS were reasonably hospitable, Jon found. They fed him, gave him cavern room with a bed of LIXAR skins, and left him to await his summons before the governing council of Mocs. He no longer wore the cumbrous space suit, for there was artificial atmosphere in the cavern passages.

Jon's mind dwelt on the Mocs as he waited. What sort of appeal would be most likely to move the Mocs? Certainly it must be based on logic. Since their discovery a hundred years ago by the explorer Norman Kane, the Mocs had developed traces of emotion. They maintained now a sort of amused tolerance toward earth visitors, where once they attempted destruction through a form of telepathic hypnotism.

Contact with terrans had set the stage for return of emotions to the Mocs, emotions that had been lost in mutations caused by the first violent radioactive rays when the craters of the moon were blown.

The Mocs would be at least partially susceptible to the emotional blandishments of Null Nevins.

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Undoubtedly the first thing they would ask would be what they stood to gain by the opening of a spaceport, and the establishing of regular service of large ships to Venus, Mars, and the outer planets. There were many advantages—it would create larger markets for the uranium mines of the Mocs. Jon began ticking other advantages off on his fingers when a Moc came into the chamber.

His thought flowed into Jon's mind. "The council awaits you."

Jon followed the Moc along a circular passage, smooth as a polished floor. Against the polished smoothness traces of rich mineral ore were to be seen, testimony to the rich mineral crust of Luna.

They came out into a large cavern room, luxuriantly furnished. A wondrously soft, thick plastic textile covered the floor, and at the end of the room a dais stood, smoothly functional in design of modern polished metal. Seven Mocs sat about the dais.

An earth man, too, sat in the group, with an amused smile playing over his big sun-browned face.

Jon felt the chill of space in his veins. He felt as though he were shriveling, and wanted to slip quietly away, back to his laboratory. The man was Null Nevins.

The old inferiority sense was upon Jon, and he bowed before the chief Moc on the dais. As in a dream he heard his voice stating Galactic's desire to establish a spaceport on Luna. He was amazed that he had been able to state it so clearly. In a moment he knew his knees would be trembling, and his voice would begin to stutter.

His confidence was evaporating under the amusement of Nevin's expression. He tensed himself, trying to remember the various advantages to the Mocs that he had memorized. He could not even remember how he was to begin. He felt his knees turning to jelly, and Nevin's face swam in his blurred vision.

The thought of the Moc ruler, Go-Vani, murmured surprisingly in his mind, "Why, Terran, do you not build these ports on Terra? Why do you desire to build them here instead?"

THIS WAS a matter of physics, of mathematics. Jon was conscious of a sense of reprieve, and as his voice answered automatically his subconscious mind wrestled with the forgotten arguments.

"It is a matter of escape velocities. In order to escape from the gravitational pull of Terra it is necessary to build a velocity of seven miles per second, or in your terms, twenty glurs per ulm. This requires a vast quantity of fuel, to be consumed before the ship is even free of Terra. This becomes increasingly important as we increase the size of our ships, due to the exponential nature of the reactions involved.

"If we could start the run to the outer planets from Luna, this escape velocity reduces to one and four tenths miles per second. The saving in cargo space, and in fuel will be tremendous. It is unnecessary to ferry fuel from Terra to equip such Lunar ships, for fuel can by synthesized here from your uranic stock piles.

"This plan then, would be to ship passengers and cargo to Luna in small rockets, and transship into the huge Lunar space liners. The engineering advantages of such a plan are obvious."

Jon saw the Mocs looking at him, without expression as they pondered this information. They seemed alien unfriendly beings. Jon looked from one to another for some reassurance

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of good will. They might as well have been bronze, for all he could discern.

"Have you other reasons for urging this project?" Go-Vani's thought murmured.

Now was the time, but Jon's carefully studied arguments were gone, lost somehow in the alien atmosphere of this room. He wanted to get away, before the rubbery quivering of his legs became entirely apparent. He stood, unable to speak, throat muscles knotted and dry.

Go-Vani's thought murmured, "Very well. The other Terran, Mr. Nevins, mentioned other arguments. He told us how our race would prosper and advance through this development. He also stated a number of reasons why only one Terran firm should be given license to operate such a port. We will consider both your arguments."

Nodding numbly, Jon permitted himself to be led from the room. The last thing he saw as he departed was the contemptuous face of Null Nevins. All the way to the cavern quarters the bitter taste of failure was in his mouth. Atoms were his field, and ergs, and quanta, but living beings were too much for him.

He lay on the bed in his quarters for a long time, gazing unseeingly at the wall.

THERE WAS a time of sleep and rest and food, and then a visit from the Moc he had met. The Moc's message flowed into Jon's mind. "I am Do-Lasto. I bring an invitation to visit the uranium mines, and discuss further the matter of the spaceports."

Do-Lasto led him outside the chamber to one of the smooth circular communication tunnels. On the tunnel was a car. Do-Lasto opened a port in the vehicle and motioned Jon to enter.

There were already two other persons in the car; Go-Vani, leader of the Mocs, and Null Nevins.

Go-Vani's thought murmured an emotionless greeting, and Null Nevins thrust out a huge brown paw, saying cheerfully, "Morning, Dyke. How goes it?"

Jon took the proffered hand, feeling the vibrant force of the big man's personality. The heartiness, the very timbre of his voice made one like and trust him instantly, and Jon had to force himself to remember things he had heard of Null's lack of scruples. He sensed, too, that Go-Vani was under something of the spell of Null's personality, though certainly his emotional responses were much fainter than that of Terran men.

Null rumbled heartily. "Guess I might as well bring you up to date, Jon. I think Go-Vani is pretty well persuaded to build the spaceport, though he will only want to do business with one firm. We will want to locate the port near the uranium mines, to make the synthesis and supply of rocket fuel most convenient. Then, too, any ore shipments for the Mocs, can be more conveniently loaded. They're gonna take us through the mines."

Jon nodded, understandingly. Null must have progressed greatly to be so friendly, so sure of himself.

The car was flowing with smooth rapidity through the polished tunnel. Here and there vents showed in the tunnel walls, vents through which were introduced the atmosphere they breathed.

The car stopped in a vast cavern. As they dismounted Jon could see the glowing atomic lights above the high cavern room that made it seem as daylight. In the distant reaches of the cavern, twin towers loomed, their frail slenderness reaching high to the arched roof of the huge, un-

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der, lunar area.

"The towers mark the entrance to the mines," Do-Lasto told them.

AS THEY approached they could see that the towers performed a useful function, for at their tops were power plants, and thin cables stretched down from these. The cables were moving, and a cylindrical bucket, incredibly large, appeared at the base of the towers, drawn out of the ground by the cables. It was carried up a considerable distance, and dumped into a vast hopper, and then the bucket descended slowly after more ore.

How primitive, Jon thought.

He heard Null's voice saying to Go-Vani, "The ore lifts are slow and cumbrous. We have not used such lifts on Terra for years."

"We have been considering modernization," Go-Vani assured him. "Perhaps you can assist us with this task."

Why, Jon wondered, must I always be so slow. Why did I hesitate, while someone else came forth with an idea and got credit for it. He set his lips grimly. If it was engineering advice they wanted, he should be able to outclass Null.

They descended the shaft.

"It should be simple to mount a rocket motor on the bottom of that cylinder. That would give you faster results, and eliminate the need for the towers," Null said.

"It is not so simple, or it should have been done long ago. The blast of the rocket reacts on the ore in these walls. The resulting radioactivity causes severe burns on the workers. From the base of the cylinders I can better explain this," Go-Vani stated.

They took a small elevator shaft, dropping perhaps a mile before they were on a level with the bottom of the ore lift shaft.

"This elevator is little used," Go-Vani continued his explanation. "It leads to an abandoned shaft. All along this shaft the ore has been too thin to be profitable."

They dismounted from the elevator into a smoothly polished, horizontal tunnel. Along this abandoned tunnel they walked a few hundred yards, and came to a landing. Resting on the landing was the huge cylindrical ore carrier. Beneath the landing another cylindrical tunnel led away, and through this tunnel were coming cars of ore, to be elevated and dumped into the great ore carrier.

"That is our present work tunnel," Go-Vani explained. "As I told you the radioactivity developed here by the reaction of the rocket blast, and the heat, make the loading dangerous and impractical. Of course we could re-design the shafts, but this would require much major work, and we have hesitated to undertake it."

"It should be possible to line the vertical shaft with some alloy," Null said.

"Yes, but that too is a major task, since the alloy would have to be of a nature to resist the rocket blast over a period of years."

Jon's mind was racing. If only he could express this idea of his. He opened his mouth, and felt his throat tightening, knotting. There was, he decided, one way to keep from making a fool of himself. He took a notebook from his pocket, and began to draw diagrams, and set up equations.

They walked through the mine. He was lost in his calculations, grunting when he was spoken to, ignoring the fact that Null was asking questions, intelligent questions that showed his interest.

As they came to the surface he finished, and saw Go-Vani looking at him oddly. He wondered then, in

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a moment of panic, if he had lost this encounter with Null Nevins, in spite of the drawings and equations he held in his hand. He extended the notes to Go-Vani.

"I think this will solve your problem," he said.

Go-Vani glanced at the drawings casually, then with mounting interest. He pondered the equations, and the faint edge of surprise showed in his voice.

"Would you consider supervising such an installation?" Go-Vani asked.

"Of course."

"The council will meet and consider these. We will send for you soon. If you can build a working lift along these lines you will not go unrewarded."

The glow of successful accomplishment was warming Jon's mind. He knew his plan was good. This should be the move that put him ahead of Nevins. He looked up, expecting to see rueful admiration on Null's face.

He saw instead, that Null was laughing at him.

"He doesn't mean what you think, Dyke," Null rumbled amusedly. "The trouble with you is you don't understand these Mocs."

JON DID not know why Null's remark should trouble him so. He had been treated with great respect and honor since the drawings and equations had gone before the council, yet the laughter of Null Nevins lived in his mind, making him unsure of himself. The reactions of living beings were something that never could be expressed by a formula, and the feeling persisted that Null had begun to realize something that Jon had missed.

Do-Lasto came now to Jon's chambers, his thoughts saying, "The council has considered your plan, and would speak to you."

It was easier standing before the council now, for Jon had the feeling that he was respected. Yet he knew the frightened voicelessness would seize him again, if much explanation was necessary.

"The idea seems entirely clear and physically sound," Go-Vani said. "It requires no explanation. I have only to ask you to supervise its installation."

"Certainly," Jon agreed.

"A most ingenuous idea. What suggested it to you?"

"On Terra plants grow that have small, round seeds. We call them peas. For as long as history is recorded children have been putting these in hollow tubes, and blowing them at some target. When I saw the cylindrical ore car in the polished shaft I thought of a child's pea shooter," Jon explained.

"I see. And the shaft, the unused shaft, that was convenient to generate the gas pressure away from out workers, the gas to shoot the car up the shaft, like a pea from a child's tube."

"Yes," Jon agreed. "It is a simple problem in hydraulics."

"Simple enough, yet we had not thought of it." Go-Vani agreed.

"If this lift is successful will you contract with Galactic Spaceways for the building of the first Lunar spaceport?"

Go-Vani shook his head. "I did not mean that at all."

"You said I would not go unrewarded," Jon stated.

"Of course not. We will pay you the very top technician's wages for your supervision. As to the spaceport, we will do what we think best."

Now Jon knew why Null had laughed. Gratitude, as Terrans conceived it, was an unknown emotion here. If Jon succeeded in the task

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of the new compression lift his only reward would be wages. But if he failed—. With a sick horror he wondered if the Mocs could be unemotional toward failure. Perhaps, yet he had the feeling that if he failed his mission was lost entirely. He had everything to loose, and nothing to gain. To this bleak discouragement there was an additional irritation; the laughing face of Null Nevins would not leave Jon's memory.

THERE followed a solid week of work, of laboring in the tunnel with hordes of Mocs under his supervision. There was work that consumed his mind, and his energy, so that he fell on the Lixar skins of his bed without thought of other things, and fell into the black sleep of sheer exhaustion.

The delicate construction of locks had to be accomplished, to seal the working shaft away from the lift tube, when the gas propelled the cylinder. This lock had to be simple, and absolutely fool proof. Yet at length they had locks in the two tunnels.

The reaction that developed the gas, to create vast quantities of heated atmosphere to pop the great loaded ore car up a mile high vertical shaft, such a reaction had to be a chain atomic reaction, to develop enough power. But then that meant sure controls had to be established, for it would not do to throw the ore load out the top of the tube and high into the sky, like the cork from a champagne bottle. So that, too had to be controlled.

Even from this comparatively innocent atomic reaction Jon had chosen, there were traces of radio activity. True, the reaction was far down the abandoned shaft, far from any work area, but still, in safety's sake, it was best to try to trap the radio-active particles, to trap them with huge screen grids, stretched across the generating tunnel.

Reports of Null Nevins reached him occasionally. Null was lunching with Go-Vani. Null had gone on a tour of the Capital City. Null and Go-Vani were seen at a place of entertainment, and that in itself was significant, for to Mocs the desire for entertainment was small.

Yet, Jon had set himself a task, and there was no time to worry about these other things till his task was finished.

At last he was satisfied.

When Go-Vani and his council came to make the preliminary inspection of the work they were accompanied by Null Nevins. At the generating chamber Null looked at Jon and said witheringly, "That is a poor reaction— Too unstable."

In answer to the question growing in Go-Vani's eyes, Jon said fiercely, "There are two isotopes suitable for this reaction. One is violently unstable. The other is very safe and lends itself to control. I am using the safer isotope."

Null shook his shaggy head. He said to Go-Vani, "Well, don't be surprised if your ear comes bursting out the top, like a cork out of a bottle. When that happens, you might as well sign with Terran Rocket lines, and settle everything."

Go-Vani did not respond, but Jon saw a thoughtful look in his eyes.

"It appears in order. We will test it tomorrow," Go-Vani said.

IN SPITE of his weariness, Jon did not sleep well that night. Here, in this Lunar room where it was never night or day, the hands of his watch told him it was an hour past Terran midnight. He had the feeling that something was wrong at the ore lift.

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The feeling grew so strong that he dressed. He would go to the tunnel and see that everything was all right. He left word that he would meet the Council at the tunnel on the morrow, instead of at the chamber as planned.

Everything appeared to be in order at the lift. The reactants were all in the tunnel. The remote controls, so that the reaction could be controlled from outside, were in order. Yet small things bothered him. He had the feeling that things were somehow not quite the same, that something had been touched, or moved.

He sat, watching, unsleeping, till the Council arrived many hours later. Then he checked his preparations. Everything appeared in order.

"You may load the first load," Jon ordered.

The steady stream of little cars flowed, dumping ton after clattering ton of ore into the huge cylindrical carrier. When it was done, Jon said softly, "This is it," and threw the switch, planning to expel the lift very slowly this first time.

Yet something was wrong, the indicators indicated that the cylindrical bullet was riding too fast, much too fast. He threw the lever to stop the reaction and saw Null Nevins looking at him, triumph in his eyes.

The pressure on his gauges continued to rise. It should fall now that the reaction had been switched off, and the cylinder moved up the tube. Pressure was building instead and the cylinder was sliding incredibly fast.

It was out of control. From where they stood, they saw the ore carrier fly high out of the tube, with a pop that almost deafened them. It turned once on the way up, spilling ore in a vast cascading rumble, then swung horizontally, falling athwart one of the towers in its downward path.

The tower buckled and inclined, breaking the fall of the cylinder, so that it fell empty, with little damage, and lay with the ruined tower hovering over it, like a mother bending over a fallen child.

It was impossible. Yet the memory of Null's leering face leaped into his mind and with a mounting rage Jon knew what had happened.

He whirled on Null. "I know why things looked different in the generating chamber. You had been there substituting the dangerous isotope for the safe one. I can prove that by analyzing the blast gases."

Nevins' grin destroyed the last vestige of Jon's control.

"I won't wait for the analysis," he flared. He lashed at Nevins in a burst of atavistic savagery, felling him with the blow and swarmed on the fallen body, drawing Nevins' arm into a bone cracking hold.

Nevins rumbled, "Don't break that arm. I'll admit it. Of course I made the substitution. Your lift would have worked otherwise."

JON RELEASED him and Null rose to his feet, smiling, unabashed. He said softly, "I still say you don't understand these people."

Jon whirled to Go-Vani. "You heard his confession!"

Go-Vani's thought murmured, "A most surprising fellow."

Jon realized he was gaping. *"A most surprising fellow"* That meant Go-Vani did not blame Null. That he thought it a legitimate part of the competition. As the anger rose again, red and uncontrollable, he knew that he was not being entirely fair to Go-Vani. It was simply the lack of emotion the Mocs had. Their response was to logic, to fact. The fact was indisputable. The lift had failed. All his forgotten arguments flared into

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his mind. By PLUTO! He'd give them logic.

His voice was a cold driving wind, the voice of a stranger, marshalling facts and argument. When he had finished he said, "There, sign with whom you choose, I have been too long among you."

Go-Vani's thought murmured, "An eloquent argument!"

Yet Jon was barely conscious of his words. He was lost in the discovery he had made about himself. He had forgotten to be shy. In moments of great importance, this was the solution, to feel strongly, and forget to be shy.

He knew, too, with a certain knowledge, that back on Terra, Dawn Shane had wanted to be kissed, and he knew how to let emotion conquer shyness when they were together again.

The thought of Go-Vani burst blackly into the dream, "It is perhaps unfortunate that such an effective argument should be wasted. The truth is we decided between you the first day you arrived. We delayed announcing it, because we wished to study you, to learn more of your odd reactions. We will deal with many Terran men when the port opens."

Slowly, sickly, Jon lifted his eyes to Null's. There was a half smile of triumph on Nevins' lips. The thought of Go-Vani continued.

"You may go now, Null Nevins. We sign with Jon Dyke."

Jon knew his own face must mirror Null's amazement. Null whirled, and left them then.

Go-Vani was watching Jon. "Why are you so surprised, Terran? We had to judge your firms by the representatives they sent. Our opinion was unanimous after that first meeting. Nevins spoke of advancement, glory, greatness. You spoke of escape velocities, and calories, and fuel weights."

For an instant it was as though Go-Vani had sighed, as though some faint trace of regret tinged his thought.

"Mr. Nevins was charming. He was such an infinitely pleasing fellow. What a pity that he was not a practical man."

THE TALKING MACHINE

☆ By Leslie Phelps ☆

THERE HAS been a singular dearth of gadgets for imitating the human voice. In fact we can only recall one, the famed "Voder" that was exhibited at the New York World's Fair and which was installed in a robot. It did a crude imitation of the human voice that left much to be desired even though it was the most advanced attempt even up to now.

The way the human vocal system works is this: we move our lips and tongue in such a way as to divide our vocal tract into boxes or cavities, one the mouth, the other the throat. Then our vocal chords make sounds, soft sounds, which are resonated or bounced back and forth until they're strong enough to come out loud and clear.

A scientist at the Bell Telephone Labs finally hit on the idea that the nearest thing to these cavities which we call throats and mouths, would be some sorts or cylinders. He'd tried out the idea—and it works.

The new machine will make all the vowel sounds that a human throat and mouth will and it'll do the job reasonably well. Of course it will be improved upon now that the basic principles of sound construction are understood.

Right now there isn't any use for such a machine. But there will be. The cybernetic ists (guys who play around with machines to duplicate human functions) are going to be ready eventually to harness the nervous systems of people who are dumb, to just such a mechanical voice box-system.

The tools are at hand. Perhaps the device will find use in one of the devices scientists are trying to make, a clever, complicated mechanism which will read aloud to the blind!

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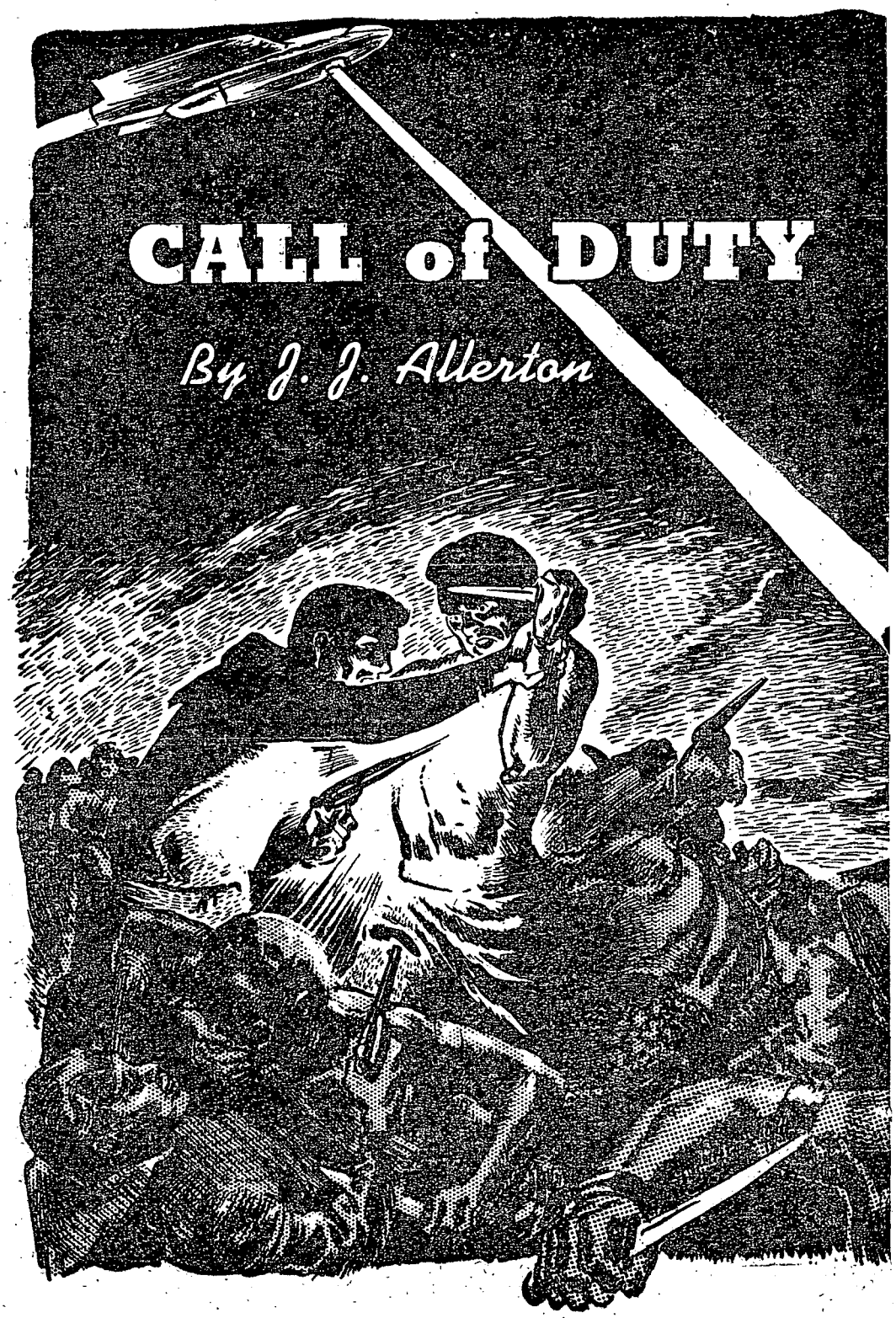

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Weller had his own definition for duty; but there are times in a man's life when right uncompromisingly takes the wrong way 'round . . .

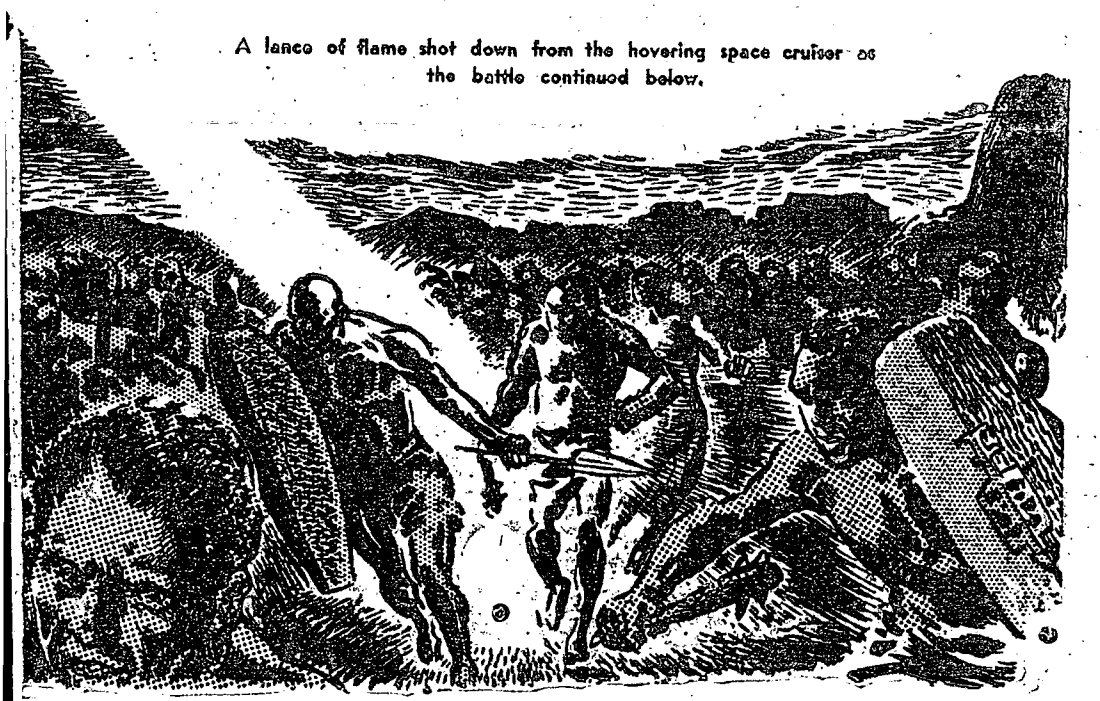
"DAMN IT, 'Bull', you can't do it! Larry's your brother."

Ed 'Bull' Weller suddenly shot erect, his shoulders hunched, his eyes glowering, his brows, thick as soot across the wide bridge of his nose, meeting. Bull Weller was a sight to see when he stood straight. Six and a half feet tall, he weighed in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty pounds, all of it bone and muscle. Tom Berthold backed away a couple of steps in alarm. Sometimes it didn't take much for Bull to use his fists on a man. Certainly less than Berthold had said.

"I don't have a brother; I don't have friends; I don't have anything on my mind but duty! Get it? Duty! I was told what to do and it's my duty to do it. That's why they gave me the *'Star Queen'*. Because Bull Weller's the kind of guy who gets done what they want. And nobody stands in his way. As for Larry, he of all men, should know how I feel. And since he acted the way he did he's going to be man enough to take the consequences."

"It's broken bigger men than Larry," Berthold said, his shoulders heaving in a faint shrug.

"He'll have to chance it, then!" Bull said. "And let me tell you something, mister. Another riot like the men put on the other night and



A lance of flame shot down from the hovering space cruiser as the battle continued below.

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I'll restrict them to quarters for a week, and *you* for a month. So keep 'em in line."

Sheer anger blinded Berthold. Otherwise he would never have permitted himself to say what he did:

"Bull! Listen! You'll go Venus-mad if you don't watch it. Larry's a good kid, and a smart one. He knows what the score is out here...."

"Yeah! A dame. A green-haired Venus dame from a *kilo* dive. So he gets into a fight over her. And kills a man. Why the dumb punk could have wrecked the whole operation. Doesn't he know I'm doing my best to get these crazy baboons in line and keep them there? I had to pay out nine bottles of booze to the headman because of that killing. Lucky for Larry the guy was a trouble-maker anyway. But Larry'll have to take the rap."

Berthold's lips tightened. He saluted smartly and did an about-face and stepped from the room. Weller sank back into his chair with a sign of intense weariness. His right hand went toward the top drawer in a subconscious desire. The bottle of Venusian *kilo* reposed within. He looked at his hand; eyes suddenly wide, as if realizing the hand's intent, and shoved it into his pocket.

Kilo, that fragrant, easy-to-down Venusian liquid. How smoothly it went down, how swiftly the effects took hold. It was against the law to take it back to Earth. It was said of the stuff that once a man drank it he would kill to get hold of more...

"Damn this heat!" Weller muttered and stepped to the window overlooking the landing field. His breath came fast as he looked to the spot where the *Star Queen* lay snuggly at anchor. "Aah, you beauty," he spoke aloud. "And guys like Berthold want me to forget duty. Why, that's how I got you. That's why they gave you to me, to make this trip. Because I have never failed in my duty." He sighed again and moved to the opposite window. A heavy frown settled over his brow as he looked over the scene spread before him: A vast pit, several miles in diameter had been dug in the earth. It was fairly shallow but would grow in depth as the gigantic digging machines would settle into their work. Immense lights, set on portable carriers, made day out of the night and showed thousands of workers busy at their tasks. Weller wiped the sweat which suddenly poured from his forehead and slipped an anti-heat capsule from his pocket and swallowed it.

"Damn this heat!" he muttered again. There was no need to look at the room thermometer. It would read between eighty-eight and ninety. That was as low as they allowed the air-conditioning to go. Lower and the difference between the outside and inside temperatures would prove too much. Men would sicken of heat fatigue and would be useless for weeks. The anti-heat capsules did an effective job, replacing on the instant all salts lost from the body, and besides, supplying a store of energy to it. The men were supposed to take two capsules in a twelve-hour period. The trouble was the men took one on arising and the other some eight hours later, when they went off duty. The energy in one of the capsules allowed them a night of fun they couldn't take otherwise.

THE THOUGHT of fun brought Larry to his brother's mind. Bull wondered what had gotten into his brother. After all, Larry was a Second-Commander, not some petty Ensign, newly-commissioned. Furthermore, Larry had gone through

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Air-Annapolis, the toughest school in the world. Duty should be a part of him, as the skin is, not something like a suit of clothes, to be worn only for some occasions.

He thought of the girl Larry had fought over. Pretty enough. Maybe stronger words would be better. Sensuous enough, provocative enough, made for loving and ready for it, Weller thought. But a *kilo* dive girl. What the hell! Let the dames alone until a man gets back. That way there's no trouble.

He turned at the sudden knock at the door. He roared for whoever was on the other side to come in. His eyes went wide, then narrowed into speculative slits at sight of the tall, almost nude man who stepped across the threshold.

"Leepa! What do you want?"

Leepa brought his palms to his eyes, his lips and then let his hands fall limply to his sides, before replying:

"Earthman! My children complain. The work is too hard. They say they are driven without letup, that they do not have time even to eat—"

Weller placed his huge fists on his hips and looked at the Venusian for a long moment. This was not new to him. Leepa was headman of a very large tribe. He supplied all the workmen on the project. The trouble was, Weller thought, they were Venusians. Lazy, undependable, shiftless, without responsibility, the men were a problem. But Leepa was their leader and when he told them to work they did.

"Did I not tell you," Weller explained in Leepa's dialect, "that I will need your men only until the depth is reached where the machines can take over?"

"Yes," Leepa said, "the Earthman did. But he did not say what that depth is."

That point, Weller realized, was going to be hard to explain. For it could be at fifty feet, five hundred or five thousand. Only the Hagel Counter could tell. Hagelium, the most precious metal in all the Universe, was found only on Venus. The genius of Earth's scientists had invented and manufactured the complex and huge machines they would use when the metal would be found. Machines which could in a single operation, tear away all the base metals, refine the Hagelium down until it was in a pure state, and press it into small bricks ready for processing. Fine leaf would be pared from those bricks and placed in the barrels of the huge heat-rifles used on air cruisers and destroyers. Hagelium had proven to be the only metal which would not melt under the terrific heat given off in the firing of the rifles.

And that was Weller's job. To bring back a ton of the metal. He had three months in which to do the job. A month had already gone by and the Hagel counter had as yet not showed any signs that the metal was at hand.

"Do I not pay your men well?" Weller said. "Nor do I complain when one or more of them do not come to work because they had too much *kilo* the night before."

"True. The Earthman speaks the truth. He does not complain. He has them lashed ten times for the first offense, and fifty for each following. But that is to be expected. It is the matter of hours and food—"

WELLER suddenly smiled. Leepa had wetted his lips with his tongue. The devil had come for whiskey, and for nothing else. But an excuse had to be used for the interview....

Weller moved over to the desk,

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opened the lowest drawer on the left and pulled two bottles of whiskey from it. He handed them to the Venusian and said:

"Here. A gift. To show how much the Earthman appreciates Leepa's good work in his behalf."

"The Earthman is kind," Leepa said, going through the ceremony of the palms to the eyes, lips and sides. Then he backed out.

Weller fell into the chair and leaned back. And after a moment his hand went to the drawer where the *Kilo* lay. And this time he did not draw it back. The swallow he took out of the gourd took half the contents from it. It was so easy to drink. And the feeling a man got from it was so fine, so *right*....

The guard saluted smartly, did a right face and marched ahead of the two senior officers of the *Star Queen*. He opened the barred gate to the pen, stepped back and did a left face and let his rifle come to rest.

The slender man who had been standing pressed against the bars stepped out and came to attention at sight of Berthold and Bull Weller. There was a ten-day growth of beard on Larry Weller's face, yet the sensitive features seemed even more so. Only the eyes were hard, blazing in anger.

"All right, Larry," his brother said. "At ease. Now I hope this has taught you a lesson. You can go back to quarters and shave and dress up. Take the afternoon off; do what you want. I won't say anything. Just stay away from the *kilo* joint!"

Larry saluted about faced and started off. He had said nothing to his brother. Suddenly he turned and marched back to the two men. Once more he came to attention.

"Sir," he said to Bull. "I don't know what lesson I was supposed to learn in that hell-hole. But I can tell you what I learned. That a man can get all twisted up, so badly he starts to fall to pieces."

"What did he mean by that, Tom?" Weller asked as they started off on their inspection of work progress at the pit.

"Gets pretty hot in that compound," Berthold said. "Sun beating down on that tin roof, and when it rains, well, you know what a Venusian rain's like.... Guess Larry's a bit knocked out from ten days of it."

"Oh, hell! Let's stop coddling Larry. I know you like him. But damn it! He's no child. Time he learned responsibility. Now enough of Larry and let's get on with the inspection...."

Berthold's lined, middle-aged features settled into lines of repressed anger. Bull was getting harder and harder to get along with. This job was a tough one, Berthold admitted to himself, but there was no reason to take it out on everyone. This business of inspection.. His lips thinned in a sour grin. Damn! Nothing but an excuse to watch the men get lashed....

THE *KILO* joint was in full swing. *Star Queen* were awaiting them at the pit. It didn't seem much deeper, since Larry had been imprisoned, ten days before. Bull moved away from Berthold, stood at the lip of the huge excavation and looked across to the far side. There was an inscrutable look on his face. He turned abruptly, marched back to the inspection line and in the company of Berthold did his inspection. He was more rigid than ever, this afternoon. Anger blazed in many eyes at the amount of punishment Bull dealt out. But their real anger was at the fact that Weller had called for an inspection in the afternoon,

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when the heat was almost intolerable and sweating made it impossible to present a neatness of appearance.

Inspection of the men over, Bull went down into the lip where the officer in charge was awaiting him. Rank on rank of Venusian worker squatted on the ground. Armed guards patrolled the area, watchful for trouble. The Venusians did not carry arms. But most of them carried a curved and sharp jungle knife. It was as necessary to them as their hands, and more useful.

The officer read from a list of petty insubordinations and work failures. And as the man's number was called Bull would issue a punishment, so many lashes, so many days in the laborers compound. Then the punishment detail was called and the first of the lashings began.

Berthold stood the whip of the steel-tipped lash as long as he could and asked to be excused. But Bull Weller stayed to the very end. For as the executive officer it was his duty to remain and see to it punishment was meeted out.

He didn't seem to notice the bloody men lying on the ground before him in the punishment area. But Bull's nostrils were dilated and tiny sparks lay deep in the brown eyes. Damn natives, he thought as he started back. Teach them to behave, he would. And he was getting a bit fed up on Leepa and his leeching. How much of the damned whiskey could he consume? Leepa had better watch his step from now on or he too would feel the steel-tipped thongs.

He heard the barked orders to return to work as he passed the last of the guards and climbed back to the surface. The men and officers had broken ranks and were either going off-duty or on. Bull looked toward Venustown in the growing dusk, and felt a sudden urge for something. Maybe a change of scene might do him good, he thought. Getting stale. Office and quarters, office and quarters. A man could go bats that way. Maybe Berthold was right.

Better go back and change to civies. Wouldn't do to see the exec. officer in town in uniform. Bad impression on the natives....

THE *KILO* joint was in full swing. The battered juke box of a previous century, the relic of one of the early visits of a first freighter to Venus, was grinding out a tune. Men stood at the bar, three deep, natives in loin clothes, sailors from the *Star Queen*, in fatigue shorts, officers in undress and *kilo* girls, the Venusian equivalent of a bar hostess.

Bull Weller parted the beaded curtains which served for a door and passed over the threshold. His piercing glance saw the table at which Berthold and two other officers were seated. Bull stepped forward, shoving his way through the dancers and receiving dirty looks until they recognized him. Then they stopped dancing for an instant and looked at him in wonder. For this was the first time the chief had ever been seen in a *kilo* joint.

One of the officers with Berthold said something in an aside to him and Berthold looked quickly toward Bull. He arose and waited his chief's arrival.

"Aah, sit down!" Bull growled. "Just keep doing what you were. I thought I'd get away from that damned operation. The sight of the pit was getting me down. At ease, gentlemen, at ease—"

He looked at the small glasses in which a green liquid, murky as turgid waters, and heavy as oil, floated. *Kilo*. He swallowed quickly and

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turned away to look at the dancers.

"Drink, Ed?" Berthold asked.

"*Kilo?*" Weller asked in apparent disinterest.

"Yeah. *Kilo—*"

"Nah. Tried it the first time I was here. Can't stomach the stuff. I'll order whiskey. At least it's a man's drink."

Weller turned to survey the dancers again and found himself looking into a pair of hazel eyes, slanted and provoking. Tawney skin contrasted with hair green as jungle grass. The girl wore a skimy halter which only served to accent the swelling breasts. A colored skirt, worn at an angle and cut off well above the knees, showed her slender curving legs and thighs in all their sculptured perfection. She held a glass of *kilo* in her left hand and placed her right hand on the table as she bent toward Bull.

He caught his breath at the sudden sight of the almost exposed breasts.

"You do not remember Neela?" she asked.

She spoke in English and fairly well. Bull shook his head. "Why? Am I supposed to?" he grunted.

She laughed and bent even closer. "Ha-ha! The Earthman jokes. 'Ten lashes!' Neela remembers. It is hard to forget ten lashes. And only because I was drinking with your brother. But with you, bah! This is for you!" The contents of the glass spilled over the hairy chest and ran down into the white fatigues Weller wore.

But before the others could get around the table Weller stopped them with uplifted hand. There was a wide smile on the man's lips. Only Berthold guessed at the wild anger which seethed beneath the surface.

"Yes," Weller said. "Now I remember. You were the girl about whom my brother fought and killed a man. Yes. I had them give you ten lashes. I see I made a mistake. Should have had them give you fifty—"

Her hand moved with lightning-speed behind her. But before it could bring out the slim blade concealed in a scabbard at the waist in the rear, Bull Weller had imprisoned the small hand. He had to move swiftly but fortunately he didn't have the table to contend with. He held the hand prisoner, twisted behind her, and grinned into her eyes. And suddenly Neela was moving sensuously against him, straining her body to his, pressing her breasts against the hairy chest.

Weller went pale through the tan and mouthing an oath, he shoved her away. She went spinning onto the floor to fall in a heap in a far corner. For an instant the tableaux held. Then one of the other girls giggled in laughter, another took it up and then the room rocked with it.

Neela got to her feet and stepped through the beaded curtains. And what might have been trouble disappeared in laughter....

Weller was sweating through every pore as he slid his chair out and fell into it. A girl came over for their order and Weller said; "*Kilo.*"

The others looked at him in stunned silence.

"Damn!" Weller exploded. "I meant whiskey. And the rougher the better. Quick, damn you!"

The girl turned and scurried to the bar.

"Native trash!" Weller said after downing the whiskey neat. "I'll be damned glad when we get back. It'll be good to see an Earthwoman again."

"Here's to it," Berthold said, holding his glass up.

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"Hold it!" Weller said. "If it's toasts we'll be making, then let's have some bottles up here."

BERTHOLD mumbled a good-night and staggered toward his quarters. Weller, sober though he had consumed two quarts of whiskey, watched the other depart, then stepped into his own room. The instant the door closed he knew he was not alone. The light switch was head high at his right hand. He flicked it up, bent low and leaped to one side....

Laughter trickled toward him as he slowly straightened. Seated on his bunk, the bottle of *kilo* cuddled against her breast, sat Neela.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded. "And give me that bottle!"

He snatched it from her fingers and she laughed again at the expression on his face. "I thought you might be lonesome," she said lightly. "And it is always better to drink *kilo* with someone you like. No?"

"No!" I don't like you, for one thing; and I don't drink this slop for another. So get out of here and off the base before I have you thrown into the laborer's compound for the night. Beat it!"

"You are foolish," she said, as she moved sinuously toward him. "Neela knows. The look of *kilo* is already in your eyes. And Neela is warm, warmer than the dried-out Earth-women she has seen from the tourist ships."

He took hold of her arm roughly, started to drag her toward the door and found that she had turned herself toward him and was pressed against him now. The blood suddenly was pounding in his veins and the room was unbearably hot and the fragrance of her was overwhelming.

He shook himself free and pulled her to the door. The room was suddenly plunged into darkness as she flipped the light switch down. And though his hand was on the knob he did not open it. Nor did he draw away when she pulled him toward the bunk....

Two more weeks passed. Two-thirds of the allotted time had almost gone. And still the Hagel counter showed a blank. Bull Weller was almost constantly on *kilo*, and the girl, Neela, was an every night visitor. More and more lashings were resorted to, to keep the laborers on the job. And Leepa was never sober anymore.

Weller sat in his shorts and fingered the message just handed him. It was brief and to the point, just like the others had been. It asked, or rather demanded, to know what was happening. He crushed the piece of paper and hurled it in a corner and sat and glowered. Then he pulled the gourd of *kilo* from its receptacle and drank the contents in a single swallow.

It never failed to give him the lift he needed. But now it worked in another way, also. It deadened his sharpness of action and thought, made him a little lethargic....

The door opened and Berthold, in the company of Larry Weller entered. There was a worried look on the second's face. Larry's sensitive features seemed carved of marble, so immobile were they.

"I—I was worried," Berthold said. "I—"

"Why the hell don't you knock?" Bull snarled.

"I did, sir," Berthold flushed at the words.

"You did? With what, tissue?"

"Sir," Larry broke in. "You ordered punishment detail today."

"Yeah! Yeah. So I did. Well. Let's get on with it."

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THE NUMBER of those to be disciplined was fantastic. The slightest lack of effort was enough to warrant ten lashes. Fifty were common punishment and of late Bull had raised the number for severe discipline to seventy-five. Almost without exception the entire seamen body of the *Star Queen* were on armed duty as guards.

Their eyes mirrored resentment as they watched his slovenly figure approach. But he had eyes only for the whip in the hands of the disciplining officer. The list of offenders and their deeds was long. And suddenly the heat made itself felt. Anger curled into open flame in Bull Weller's breast.

"Ta hell with it!" he suddenly shouted. "Who's next on the list?"

The officer read the next number and an elderly native stepped forward. Silence greeted his move. It was obvious to all the others something was amiss. Only Bull Weller could not sense it.

"So-o? Loafing on the job, eh? Well. I'll teach you, personally, why you shouldn't do it again. Give me the lash, Ensign."

The old man faced Bull, not a sign of fear on his rather handsome features. "'Tis not meet that such as you should punish one as I," the old man said. "Punishment should be given by small men."

It was a rebuke which made the faces of all those listening go red. But Bull was fingering the steel-tipped whip with ill-repressed desire. He was deaf to the old man's words. He knew only that *he* was going to do the whipping today....

The old man held up until the thirtieth stroke. Then he fell to the ground, too spent to do more than moan. Blood streamed from the gaunt body in a crimson tide.

"Get up, damn you!" Bull Weller shouted in a wild frenzy. "I ain't through!"

"You'll kill him, you fool!" Berthold suddenly stepped in front of Weller. "Those natives'll run amok any second."

Weller whirled, shot a chopping right to Berthold's jaw, and snarled, "Arrest this man. Arrest him, I say—"

Berthold recovered from the blow, stood stiff and straight while the Ensign approached. The side of his jaw was already purpling.

"I'll take it all the way to headquarters," Berthold said softly.

"Maybe," Weller said, suddenly sobering. "And maybe not." He turned suddenly morose, as though conscious of his fall from grace. His action had been uncalled for. Yet he found it impossible to retreat from the position he had left himself in. His was not a compromising nature. "All right. Dismissed—"

BULL WELLER paced the room with the frenzy of an animal. The last of the *kilo* he possessed had been used a few moments before. It was too early for Neela to come. She had become his source of supply. To hell with her, he decided of a sudden. She got it from the *kilo* joint she worked at, anyway. He could get it there, also. He searched his pockets for money. Nothing. He remembered then that he had given the last of it to Neela for the purchase of the last gourd of *kilo*.

So they'll give it to me for nothing, a good customer like me, he thought. And if they don't, I'll just take it, that's all. And I'd like to see the one'd stop Bull Weller....

Ordinary seamen passed him as he hurried along. They grinned as he passed, not even noticing their sloppy salutes. Nor did he hear their sudden talk about, "—*Kilo*-happy Weller—"

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Weller had but one thought in mind, the drug-like drink....

The *kilo*-joint was alive and brimming over with business. A freighter had docked that morning and the merchant seamen were off duty. The first place they had headed for was the *kilo*-joint. Weller swept aside the tinkling beads and peered through bloodshot eyes at the now-familiar scene. Several of the men were wrestling in play with some of the serving girls. The noise was deafening with the shouts of men and the squeal of women and the constant grind of the ancient juke box.

Bull shouldered his way to the bar. The native bartender came over, eyes clouded in half-anger, half-fear.

"A bottle of *kilo!*" Bull grunted.

The native turned and took one from the shelf and placed it in front of Bull. Bull grabbed it, pried the cork off and swallowed a full half of it.

"—The money, please," the native said.

"Money? Navy doesn't need money," Bull said as he started to leave. "Not me, anyway."

"No? And who the hell are you? And what navy you belong to?" a thick-set man with truculent eyes asked thickly as his heavy hand fell on Bull's shoulders. "Pay the man, 'fore I take it outa your hide."

Weller placed the gourd carefully on the bar, pivoted sharply and swung. The blow knocked the other in a heap. But he didn't stay on the floor long. Blood streamed from a pulped mouth as the man lowered his head and came in swinging with both hands.

Bull took a couple of punches, suddenly bent and grabbed the other about the waist and lifted him high, hurled him across the room. Silence had fallen the instant the fight had started. But as the sailor's body went sliding across the room, bowling over a couple of drunken dancers in its wake, bedlam broke loose. A half dozen men rushed Bull, and at the same time a general melee broke out.

Bull roared in sheer glee. A free-for-all, something he hadn't been in for years was taking place. For the first time all thoughts of *kilo,* all thoughts of Neela left him. A fight, the feel of flesh being smashed, of men tumbling to the floor under the sledge-hammer blows of his mighty muscles, that was the life.

HE LEAPED forward, swinging with both hands, powerful blows which knocked a man down to stay. But he wasn't the Bull Weller of old. *Kilo* had taken its toll of him. His sharpness was gone and even some of the power. He swung with his weight alone, now. It was enough for a while. Then as more and more men came to him, and he had to contend with three and sometimes four at a time, he found himself gasping for breath, taking more punishment than he was giving.

As usual, the natives stayed out of the fight. It could mean a death sentence to get caught in one. But now, as if conscious of Bull Weller's weakness, some of them edged into the fight. And their way of fighting was with the razor-sharp jungle knife.

But though Bull's strength and speed was not of old, his brain still functioned with speed and clarity. He realized he was going to get a terrific shellacking. He had been fighting in the open. Suddenly, he lifted one of those trying to get in at him and swung him as one swings a club. The others fell beneath the swinging body of the one in Bull's hands. Then Bull slung the man across the floor and leaped for the bar.

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Something tore at his side and Bull swerved and kicked at the figure which had suddenly slid in at his left. The native was lifted off the floor by the kick and the jungle knife fell from his nerveless fingers. Bull scooped the blade up, reached the bar and turned at bay.

"Come one, come all!" he gasped. "This little toy'll take the whole lot of you—"

He waved the weapon in front of him in a threatening gesture. And saw beads of red fly from it. Not till then did he realize he was wounded. He could feel the blood trickle from the slit in the flesh. He knew it was only a flesh wound. But he could not take this bleeding for long. He caught the flash of the thrown knife in the nick of time and ducked. It buried itself in the wood panelling behind the bar. Another came his way and this one almost did the job. He barely ducked in time and as it was felt the blade slice a nick out of his ear lobe.

Help came from an unexpected source. The stocky man who had started the fight suddenly shouted:

"Get those native boys. They're using stickers."

The room was cleared in a moment. Bull leaned weakly against the bar, the knife drooping from his fingers. The stocky man stepped to his side, a wide grin on the man's mashed lips, the blood still dripping in a steady flow.

"You sure can hit, matey," he said grudgingly. "Too bad those natives started throwing the stickers. We'd have had one hell of a good time. Say! You're hurt!" he suddenly saw the spreading stain on the undershirt.

"Huh?" Bull asked, trying to concentrate on what the other was saying.

"Hell! You're hurt. Better get you back to your base. Lend a hand here, mates."

Instantly, the same men Bull had been battling were at his side, their rough calloused hands tender as they could make them as they lifted him up and carried him out. It took four of them to carry him the quarter mile to the base.

"Thanks, men," Bull said as he pulled himself free. "I can manage from here on. I'll send for the medico—"

They turned at the sudden opening of the door. Bull felt the blood leave him as he saw Neela, struggling in the arms of a couple of seamen, come screaming and kicking from his room. Behind her, pale and determined, came Berthold. They stopped at sight of the disheveled and bloody Bull Weller.

"What goes here, Berthold?" Bull demanded. "I put you under arrest...."

"And I ordered him released," said a quiet voice from the doorway. "Consider yourself under arrest, Captain Weller, until further time as the case is brought to the proper authorities."

BULL HAD come erect at sight of the gold braid on the man's sleeve. He had recognised him immediately. Admiral Bryan, head of the Air Arm of the Navy.

"May I ask what happened, sir?" Bull asked in a low voice.

"Too many things," Bryan said. "The work was not progressing satisfactorily, we could not get a proper answer as to why, reports were coming in of your actions, and I thought the importance of your task demanded my personal investigation. You knew the fleet of the invaders from Star X would be here within six months. The finding of Hagelium was of the utmost importance. Yet

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you found time to consort with a native girl, drink *kilo*, a forbidden drink, until you could no longer think straight, and the greatest crime of all, allow yourself to become an accessory in the crime of sabotage."

"Sabotage!" Bull roared. "That's a lie!"

"No it isn't," Bryan replied. "Do you know why the Hagel counter never showed the presence of Hagelium? Because the native girl tampered with it while you were under the influence of *kilo*—"

"Neela! Not you," Bull said.

She broke free and suddenly leaped at Bull, spitting at him, her fingers hooking at his face, tearing the skin to bleeding ribbons. The guards pulled her away while she screamed:

"Pig-Earthman. Killer of helpless old men. Old fool, kilo-drunk. Aah! How I fooled you—"

Bull heard his brother's voice as from a long distance:

"I tried to tell you, Ed. But you wouldn't listen. Neela was Leepa's daughter. They tried to sabotage the work from the beginning. I got wind of it and tried to worm it out of the girl but she caught on. There was a fight and I had to kill the native. You wouldn't listen, you bull-headed fool."

Bull turned away from his brother's pitying eyes and mumbled:

"I was only trying to do my duty. I was only trying to do my duty."

"Duty," Admiral Bryan said slowly, "is an elastic word and does not bind all the time. You were blind to the important things in your pursuit of duty. And so you failed, even failed to maintain what you held the most important thing. Look about and see where your duty led. Sloppy personnel, maintenance in disrepute, discipline at a low ebb, and worse, open sabotage. There is no excuse, Weller."

"I-I'm not try-trying to ex-excuse...." Bull Weller began and slumped to the ground in a faint....

"WHAT TIME is it, guard?" Weller asked. He felt better, refreshed, and no longer stiff.

The guard turned a worried face toward the man on the bed.

"Huh?" he asked foolishly.

"What's wrong?" Weller asked at the worried look on the man's face.

"Listen," the guard said.

Weller stepped to the window before the guard was conscious of his move. He saw and heard then what was happening. The camp was being attacked. Tiny flashes of orange flame lit the night and showed where the forces of the *Star Queen* and the Admiral's ship, *The Missouri*, were fighting.

"How long's this been going on?" Weller asked.

"Since dark. They got to the generator and smashed it. And the dirty savages are like snakes. They sneak in, cut with those damned slicers, and run."

Four days had gone by since they had placed him under guard at the make-shift hospital. The wound he had suffered, healed quickly and well by the end of the fourth day and now Bull felt restless, anxious to get out, at least for a walk. But they had told him another day would have to pass before he would be permitted exercise. Now he peered through the window at the strange fight raging below. And suddenly he made his mind up.

The guard fell like pole-axed steer under the sledge-hammer blow Bull shot to the side of his jaw. In an instant the ray pistol in the guard's holster was in Weller's hand and seconds later he was slipping down the quiet corridors.

The natives had picked their night

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for a fight. The clouds were thick and heavy, and sweat poured from Bull Weller in a constant stream as he made his way toward the fighting. Bull guessed at the reason for the battle. The giant machines had already started their work and shortly the Hagelium would lie snuggly in the hold of the *Star Queen*. It was to the prevention of that which led to the attack.

He stumbled over a body knelt at its side and saw it was a sailor from the Admiral's ship. The man's head hung by a thread of bloody flesh. Weller dropped on the instant. The only way to make progress, he realized, was to crawl. The ground was sopping wet and in a moment he was not aware of physical discomfort. He had to get to Berthold and Larry!

Something moved to his right and he froze. Again the something moved. Then he saw it, a completely nude native, jungle knife in hand, stealing through the knee-high grass. The native grunted once, sighed and died, as Weller drove home the blade.

Once more Weller began to crawl forward. He had the lay of the land pretty well in mind. The Earthmen were entrenched somewhere ahead. Now and then he caught the flashes of their ray pistols. His own was tucked safely in the waistband of his shorts. The knife he had taken from the native when he fell on him was in his right hand, ready for instant use. At least it would be silent and as efficient as the ray pistol.

HE LOST track of time and place, only knew that he had to be fairly close by now, as he crawled along. Then he came to a rise and peered over the edge of it. He grinned widely when he saw that he was but thirty yards from a group of the Earthmen. The grin faded when he saw what lay between him and the others. At least a hundred of the natives were in the open, prone on their bellies, waiting the chance to slip in....

He knew he had to risk it. Rising to his feet Bull bellowed:

"Larry! Tom Berthold! It's me, Bull!"

It was a chance in a hundred he took that either Larry or Tom would be among those below. But they were. Their answering shout sent him pounding across the grass, straight toward the hidden natives. He ran low, as if he were still playing football for Air-Annapolis, the knife held firmly in his hand.

Men rose from all sides and tried to intercept him. Some reached him only to fall beneath the slicing blow of the sharp knife. But some managed to get in blows of their own. How it happened that none were serious in nature was a miracle of luck. And a greater one that Bull won through. But in the excitement of his sudden dash the natives had lost their heads and had risen to their feet. The ray pistol and rifle fire cut them down in their tracks, the instant Bull crossed over.

"Damn it!" Larry growled as he embraced his brother. "The Admiral'll have you executed for this."

"Yeah. Yeah," Bull said gruffly. "Later. Right now we got to beat these guys. Where's Tom?"

"Right here, you bull-headed ape," a voice spoke out of the darkness at Weller's side.

"Good! Fine. These our boys, Tom?" Weller asked.

"Every one."

"Mind if I take over?" Bull asked, and without waiting began to issue orders. Larry and Berthold gasped at what Bull planned. Yet if it worked the battle would be over in short order. There was one hitch to it, though.

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"—The trouble is," Berthold explained. "They're between us and the ship—"

"So we fight our way in," Bull said calmly. "Just like that."

"Just like that," Larry Weller said to himself. And marvelled as he always had in the past, at the daring of his elder brother.

IT WAS hand-to-hand battle. Their weapons were useless in the darkness. More, they could not risk indiscriminate firing for fear of hitting a comrade. Men died and fell as the two forces met. Bull shouted, his voice clarion-loud, as he slugged and stabbed at whatever naked shape came in his path. Silently, but as vicious and efficient, Larry and Tom fought at his side. Time after time it seemed they could not possibly win through. And time after time Bull Weller's sheer guts paved the way over a heap of dead bodies. The three men were bleeding from many cuts though none serious in nature, by the time they reached the *Star Queen.*

The hundred which had started to the ship were half that in number. But they were enough for what Bull planned. Within a matter of minutes the land anchor was shipped and seconds after, with Bull at the helm, and Tom and Larry at the firing command posts, the *Star Queen* lifted her spheroid shape into the air. Bull whipped the ship back and forth in slow runs to make sure he had enough air speed, then gave the command for the execution of his plan.

Night turned into day as hundreds of lights flashed their brilliance from the belly of the ship. And as the scene lighted and the shapes of men were made plain, Tom and Larry set their gun boards to work, firing with small calibre heat guns. The natives below melted before the ravaging flames and ran blindly to escape the holocaust of fire from the sky. And a lone figure stood erect, his greying hair blowing in the breeze, and his head tilted back.

"Whoever did that will get a double-promotion. On my word of honor!" Admiral Bryan said.

* * *

ADMIRAL BRYAN looked at the bandaged figure of Bull Weller and shook his head wryly. The three, Bull, Larry and Tom Berthold stood at rigid attention before the Admiral. The *Star Queen* was back at anchor again.

"You have done a magnificent job, Bull," the Admiral said.

"Thank you, sir," Weller replied.

"But despite your work I must, regretfully, pass sentence on you. The charges you face are serious, as well you know. And since you were guilty of them I am forced to do what must be done. Ten years at hard labor, Edward Weller, is the minimum I must pass upon you."

Bull Weller paled and gulped. He knew the Naval law as well as the man facing him. Bryan was right, Weller thought. There was no way out of it....

"Gentlemen," Admiral Bryan suddenly was tense and low-voiced. "I have been informed by the Admiralty, that we are officially at war. The fleet of the invaders from Star X has been sighted. I was also notified by Admiralty that the sabotage which took place on Venus was inspired by traitors who used the guise of tourists. This I tell you in passing. The important message, however, was the notification of war.

"It is important to all of you in many ways. By the authority vested in me by my superiors, Thomas Berthold is now a Captain of the Air Arm of the United States Navy. And Lawrence Weller, by that same authori-

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ty, a full Commander. As for you, Edward Weller, I grant you full pardon by that act of war, which enables me to pardon prisoners who warrant a pardon. Hell. We need men like Bull Weller.

"How do you feel now, Rear Admiral?"

"Rear Admiral?" Bull gasped.

"Yes. I promised the man a double-promotion, who thought of using the *Star Queen*. And although no one heard me I felt duty bound to keep that promise."

"Duty bound—?" Bull asked in a low voice.

"Yes. And remember, duty is a flexible thing Bull. Don't use it as a rod."

"Not anymore. I'll go to Tom and Larry first," Bull promised as the four sat down to the game of poker they had started earlier, before Bryan had received his message....

GRANDFATHER PARADOX

★ By John Weston ★

"THE ONLY field of science," Ree Parker said, waving his cigarette like a baton, "which the physicists haven't touched—and never will—is time."

John Wilson took another sip of his drink.

"That's a funny thing for you to say," he grinned, "especially when your old man was one of the few physicists who ever attempted to understand it."

"He was on the wrong track," Parker said. "After his disappearance I went through all his papers and while he talked about time, he didn't really say anything."

"Are you sure? Maybe you simply didn't understand what he was trying to get at."

"No," Parker disagreed, "I'm sure I'm capable of understanding as much mathematics as anyone else. Oh—before I forget—I wanted to tell you that I've invited an acquaintance over tonight. I met him at the University Club. He's very interesting and we talked a lot about the nature of time. And incidentally, you can tell me whether or not I'm going nuts. This guy—he calls himself Dr. Lensen—looks exactly like father—well, the resemblance at least is uncanny. That's what attracted me to him in the first place. See what you think of him. He talks a lot, but I don't think he says too much."

Wilson laughed: "You're a complete skeptic, Reed. Maybe this guy really is your father—remember you have no idea of what happened to him."

Parker laughed too: "Now you're giving me the needle. You know my pet argument. I can't see that anything can ever be done about time—I always think of the 'Grandfather Paradox'—remember?"

"Yes, I know it by heart." Wilson raised his voice to a mocking tone. "Time-travel is impossible, because a man could travel back in time, inadvertently kill his grandfather, and thus prevent himself from ever having been born!"

"That's what I mean," Parker agreed, "Past and future events can't have such a close link."

The buzzer interrupted the conversation and Parker left the room to return a minute later with a stranger in his wake. Wilson was shocked by the amazing resemblance of the man to Parker's father.

After the introductions and the small talk, the conversation soon directed itself to the scientific problem of the nature of time. Here Wilson repeated Parker's favorite paradox of the grandfather.

The grey-haired man shook his head: "I'm afraid it won't do," he said quietly, "it's completely wrong. Time travel is possible."

"I suppose you've traveled through time," Parker said, grinning.

"Yes," the older man remarked matter-of-factly, "I have, son."

Parker went white and Wilson clenched the arms of his chair.

"You're joking, of course," Wilson said. "remember the paradox."

"The paradox doesn't exist," the man smiled, as if thinking aloud, "you see, there is another and more important idea. The time-traveler may in no way operate upon future or past events. He may only observe..."

...Parker handed Wilson another drink. "Gee—that was funny," he said musingly. "I had the damndest feeling as if I was talking with someone..."

"Funny—is right!" Wilson agreed. "I had a crazy idea that someone was in this room speaking with us." He raised his drink. "We'd better cut it out. We're spending too much time talking about time. Bottoms up!"

"Bottoms up!" Parker echoed.

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CRYSTAL GROWERS

By Sandy Miller

THE "CRYTAL" growers sounds like something right out of science fiction, but far from being so, it describes an amazing new scientific technique, partially stemming from shortages brought about by the last war. Quartz crystals, as everyone knows, are an essential part of radio and radar apparatus. During the war the U.S. got most of its quartz from Brazil—as did most of the Allies. But the Germans had no access to this vital material.

A professor Nacker devised an ingenius system of growing quartz crystals, using the same ideas which have been used in growing other types of crystalline materials. Now our own Bell laboratories have taken over and improved the method. It means that no longer will we be dependant upon foreign sources for this essential component of modern radio, radar and TV equipment.

A small cylindrical tube is filled with a solution of sodium carbonate. The bottom of the tube is covered with a layer of silicon dioxide—refined sand. The tube—it's called a "bomb"—is sealed with a weld and then kept in a furnace at a temperature of around three hundred degrees. Previously, suspended in the solution in the bomb is a small "seed" cyrstal of quartz around which the growth takes place. The crystal in the bomb—its internal pressure around fifteen thousand pounds per square inch—gradually takes form at a rate of about several hundredths of an inch per day. When the bomb is opened later, there is found a beautiful symmetrical quartz crystal more perfect than those found in nature.

While the quartz crystals are important in themselves, this new method, once analyzed from a theoretical standpoint will provide an interesting clue to the whole nature of life—for crystals and living organisms are not far removed.

KOBALD IN THE HEARTH

By Ramsey Sinclair

JOE SKAGERAC squinted through the violet lenses into the flaming mouth of the open-hearth furnace. He shook his head as if to clear away the keening throb that wracked it. He gritted his teeth and bent down, his brawny arms scooping up shovel after shovel of vanadium alloy into the open gate.

It seemed to him that the molten monstrous pool of metal devoured the material like a ravenous animal. Joe wiped his forehead with a rag and leaned on his shovel. The door closed and the fire went out of his eyes.

"How's it going, Joe?" Mr. Sellman asked in a friendly tone. Nightly he made the rounds and the expected question got the anticipated answer:

"She go all right, Mister Sellman, she go all right," Joe answered, gutturally.

"Fine," boomed Sellman, "we're putting in six hundred pounds of manganese tonight. Spread it good!"

"Yah, Mr. Sellman."

When the concentrate came, the door slid up and Joe bent to work again, powerful back and arm muscles glittering with sweat as he hurled load after load into the flaming maw. As Joe gazed into the fire it seemed alive. The mighty blasts of ravening gas raced across the surface of the molten steel, cooking it, converting it into the alloy it would become. The shimmering surface of metal seemed alive as gas bubbled through it. The white hot fire-brick walls of the furnace cast an incredibly intense light on the inferno, and to Joe's tortured eyes it seemed as if the devils were in it.

Joe stood stock-still.

On top the flaming sea of metal stood a figure. It was small and gnarled, twisted and dwarf-like. Over its shoulder it carried a pick and its long beard dragged at its feet.

Joe shook his head. But the image didn't go away. It seemed to advance to the very edge of the furnace door. Now Joe could distinguish the warped and twisted smile on its hideous little face. It raised an arm. *It beckoned.*

Joe screamed shrilly. With a wild desperate gesture, he flung his shovel in the furnace, tore off his goggles and ran screaming down the long line of the open-hearth.

"Too bad," the doctor said later, "the man's as mad as a hatter. *Kobalds!* Where did he ever pick up such mythology? Why the man can hardly read!"

But nobody told the doctor that two days later, the number Three furnace—*Joe's furnace*—burst a section of lining and spilled three hundred tons of molten steel all over the cooking room floor—and took two men with it...

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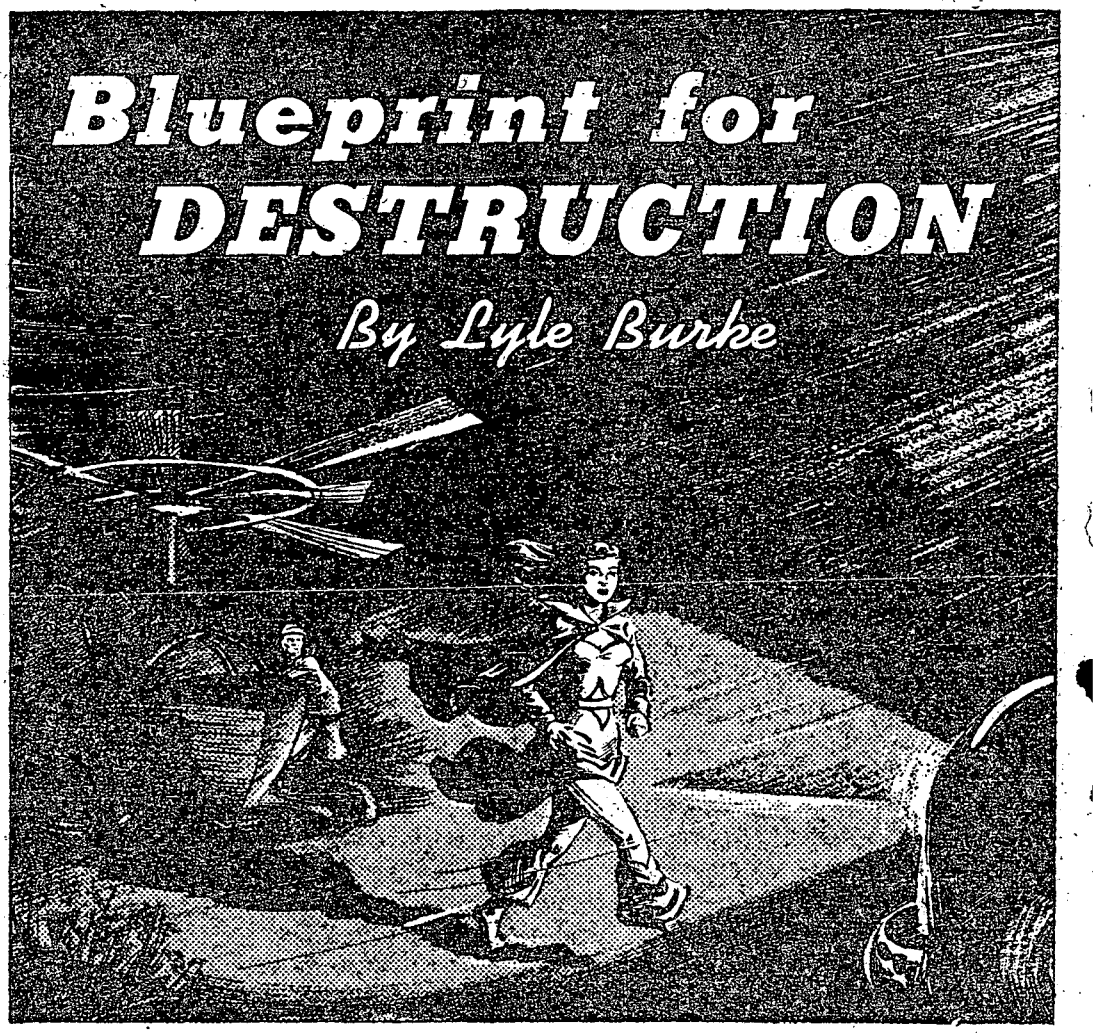

Blueprint for DESTRUCTION

By Lyle Burke

Val fought the scum of eight planets to carry out his job. The trouble was, he forgot there were nine worlds in the solar system . . .

THE AERO-COUPE was parked alongside the road with its parking lights off. The rain was pelting down and I was in a hurry. But the road was bad at this point and I was going slow. I caught sight of the head which was suddenly sticking out of the side window. It was blonde....

"Please." There was no fear in her voice. Just urgency.

I braked down and slid out from behind the wheel and moved slowly toward the aero-coupe. She saw me coming and after a second the door opened and she stepped out. She was wearing a nylon raincoat and was hatless and her high-heeled shoes

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were not made for this kind of weather. A man followed her. He was young, fairly well set-up and from the set of his jaw looking for trouble.

"On your way, buddy," he said.

"He bothering you miss?" I said.

There was another in the car. I heard his voice: "Get back in here, Jack."

But the first was close enough to get a good look at me. His mouth twisted wryly. He put his hand on the girl and said: "Come on. You don't want to go with this..."

I hit him. He might have gotten up though it was a solid punch. But he only raised himself on an elbow and stared at me. I'd been stared at before.

I heard the door slam and turned quickly. The girl was gone. There was only one place she could have gone to. Inside my car. She would keep. I waited.

"I'll take care of him," the man in the car said.

I said, "Thanks," smiled and turned and went back to my car.

She said, "Mind if I smoke?"

I offered her a cigarette out of my pack but she shook her head and opening her purse took out a metal case with a lighter attached. I jerked slightly as she suddenly threw light on my face from the attached lighter.

"Am I the one?"

"I just wanted to see what you looked like," she said. There was a smile in her voice. "Thanks for the lift."

"Were they bad?"

"Just nasty. They're never dangerous. I don't scare easy."

She snuggled down in the corner furthest from me and looked at me. I knew she was looking but my mind was on other things. Heltown. And Har Tarn. The rain lessened, slowed to an intermittent sprinkle and by the time we got to the suburbs of Heltown stopped altogether.

"Any place I can drop you off?" I asked.

She had been making her mind up. "We were going out for a couple of drinks. I'd still like some."

I would have loved it, too. She was tall, blonde, and the prettiest Venusian I'd ever seen. Even the pale green color added to her charm. But

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I had something to do tonight. Something which had nothing to do with blonde babes from Venus. Even pretty ones....

"Not tonight. But I'm available for parties and such most any other time. Suppose I look you up?"

"No! Tonight!"

I jerked my head about. She was making a face at me, her red mouth screwed up in a pout, her hands pounding at her bag in her lap.

"Tonight, tonight..." She kept repeating.

I didn't get it. One thing I knew. I wasn't going to listen to this all night. We passed a taxi stand and I braked down and came to a stop along the curb. I shoved my hand past her opened the door on her side and said:

"I'll be around. Be seeing you..."

Her eyes were wide. I guessed she wasn't used to being shoved around. By no one. Particularly by an Earthman. Suddenly her lips were on mine, her hand was pressing my leg and she was gone. I looked down at the spot her hand had pressed. A white oblong of pasteboard lay on my pant leg. I looked at it in the light of the dash. There was nothing else but a name on it. Melis Tarn...

THERE WAS a huge metal knocker on the door. I swung it against the plate and a gong sounded from behind the wooden panel. The door swung open and light blossomed suddenly from hidden fixtures. A tall thin man with lined gaunt features stood before me. He held one hand on the knob and there was something in *his* face which said he'd have loved to slam the door in *my* face.

"Har Tarn is expecting me," I said. "The name is Val Vane."

His voice was low: "Come in, please."

He left me sitting on an upholstered metal sofa, facing one of those obscure arty paintings the Venusian monied crowd loved to have in their homes. Tarn Hall was the biggest place I'd ever been in, Earth or Venus. It looked like something a telemovie director had dreamed up but couldn't get because the budget wasn't large enough.

"Mr. Vane... A pleasure, sir." He was walking forward, hand outstretched, a smile on his dark green face, his eyes carefully hidden beneath craggy brows and lowered lids. "I am Har Tarn."

I took his hand, squeezed it hard and gave it back to him. He motioned for me to precede him and I walked toward the room the door to which was being held open by the tall servant. It was Tarn's study from the impression I got of it. A lot of furniture none of it functional except the biggest damned desk I'd ever seen. There was straight-backed chair to the right of the desk. Tarn gestured for me to take it and seated himself at the desk. Maybe the smile was permanent, I didn't know.

"I was told you were coming, Mr. Vane. I am completely at your service. In every way."

"Fine!" I said. "Then we can get right down to things. Somebody stole something from you and you want it back. Right?"

The smile wasn't permanent. A blunt-tipped finger made circles around his full lips and his eyes saw something just over my head. He took his finger away from his mouth and put it on the desk top and continued to make circles with it. "Ah. You use the direct approach, I see. I'm afraid it isn't quite as simple as that. Were it money involved, well, then certainly the case

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would be in another category. But this, this is something altogether out of the ordinary."

He was as smooth and vague as the painting I'd been looking at in the reception hall. "Let me be the judge of that," I said. "Just what is involved?"

"Two sections of the master plan for the newest atomic super-rifle."

I'd read and heard of it. As much as the newsheets would print and the tele-audio would say. Not too much. It was very hush-hush, I I gathered.

He went on: "The thought must occur to you why didn't I go to the proper authorities? A very personal reason. There would have been an investigation by the government of Terra and whether or not the fault was mine I would have been relieved of my position. As director of the board of Velanium Inc. I am the most powerful man on Venus, and the richest. As plain Har Tarn I'm just another green man."

There it was. Even in the biggest of them. All you had to do was walk on the street and you felt it on the air; hate the Earth and anyone part of it. I couldn't say I blamed them too much. But I wasn't here to judge. I was here to solve a robbery. I asked him for the particulars and got them.

The sections had been taken a week ago. No new stealing during the past week. From what he said I gathered the thieves had this in mind. The rifle was in the last stages of preparation but could not be finished without the missing sections. Tarn had stalled Terra and could stall for another week but more than that would be impossible. There were but two men who had anything to do with the sections, one, Globus Jov; and one, Heg Patta.

I got their addresses from Tarn, shook hands with him again and was ushered to the door.

SHE WAS sitting, curled up like a cat, her slanting yellow eyes narrowly watching me. A small smile was on her red lips. "I'm still in the mood for a drink."

I closed the door carefully, lit a cigarette and blew smoke against the windshield. "I don't think your father would like it."

"My father doesn't like anything I do. But I do them just the same."

I knew what she'd done. Taken a cab and tailed me. Then she'd made herself at home in my car and waited until I showed up. Rain suddenly spattered against the windshield.

"You wouldn't make me walk in the rain, would you?" she asked.

"You were going to when I met you."

"Oh! Heg Patta wouldn't have let Jacka make me do that. He works for my father. Jacka just had too much to drink."

I flicked the starting lever and the engine purred into action. There was enough room for a U turn and I headed back the way I'd come. It was really coming down now...

It was a rough joint she'd directed me to. But I knew only a place like this could get away with serving whiskey on Venus. The stuff was prohibited. But if a man wanted a drink there was always a place sneaking it. This was one of those places.

It lay in a shallow valley surrounded by a growth of *elle* trees. When we topped the rise just before entering the valley I saw the glow of furnaces a mile or so in the distance. The vast plant of Velanium Inc. lay in that direction. And to our right a mile or so was Heltown.

We attracted about as much attention as another pair of flies at a

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garbage heap. A waiter with a patch over one eye and a badly scarred cheek showed us to a table along the far wall. I looked about after ordering drinks. I always made it a rule to spot an exit just in case there was trouble. And women like Melis Tarn meant trouble, soon or late.

There were a dozen or so drinking-girls; green-faced Venusians, Earth girls, whose faces looked even paler than usual beside their friends from Venus, thick-bodied pop-eyed women from Mars and even a tiny two-foot tall girl from Mercury. I saw crewmen from the space freighters of half the Universe. Lean, hungry-looking men from Earth: ten-footers from Mars, cruel-faced men; tiny, laughing men from Mercury and a handful from Saturn, stern-looking as the three-headed Gods they worshipped.

And sitting about, always in the company of their own kind, the hating green-faced Venusians.

"You're not much fun," she said. She was pouting again.

I smiled.

"That's better! You have a nice smile. What's your name?"

I told her.

"Nice... Val Vane," she repeated it again: "Val Vane. And what does Val Vane do?"

I told her.

Her eyes went wide in excitement and her lips made an O shape. "A private detective! I've never met one before."

"Well," I said. "If you'd have come in you would have met me formally. I'm working on something for your father."

Her eyes narrowed, almost closed. "You don't know my father," she said. "What sort of work are you doing for him?"

But I wasn't looking at her. I'd caught sight of a couple of men who had just come in. They were Heg Patta and Jacka. She followed the direction of my glance and I heard her breath come out in a deep sigh.

IT WAS JACKA who spotted us. He whispered something in an aside to his friend. Patta kept shaking his head to what the other was saying. Then Jacka slapped the other's shoulder and moved in a lurching walk toward us.

There was a purple bruise alongside his chin. It didn't fit well with his green complexion. He was quite drunk.

"You gotta lot of nerve comin' here with this man!" he growled at Melis.

I figured she'd be trouble, and this looked like it. Jacka was just drunk enough not to give a damn what he was saying. I could hit him again. But he might have friends here...

"I'll take him away, Melis," Patta was suddenly at our table. He grabbed the other by an arm and said, "All right, Jacka. Let's get along."

"Why don't you prop him up somewhere and come back and join us?" Melis asked. "Another drink or two..."

Patta gave her a look out of the corner of his eye. His lower lip folded over his upper and he shook his head slightly. He had sleepy eyes and a thin, hooked nose, and his hair was a dark shade of brown in contrast to the other Venusians whose hair was some shade of gold.

We'd finished our third round of drinks by the time Patta came back. Jacka was asleep, his head on the bar. I ordered another round of drinks.

"Mr. Vane is a private detective," Melis opened the ball. "He's working for my father."

"Yes," I said. "Someone stole some valuable papers. I was hired to get

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them back. Know anything about that, Patta?"

He gave me a sleepy look, then looked away. "Why should I know anything about them?"

"They were in your charge."

"Tarn gave you the wrong information. They were in Jov's keeping."

"Then why did he say you had something to do with it?" I asked.

"Maybe he doesn't like me? Or the fact that I and his daughter are friendly?"

I rolled the stem of the glass between my fingers. There was a film of whiskey at the bottom of it. I could ask some more questions, and would probably get some more of the same answers. Light flickered and I looked up in time to see Melis light a cigarette from her lighter. Her fingers were quivering. She saw me looking at her and gave me a crook-mouthed grin.

"Time to shove off, Melis," I said, as I got to my feet.

"No more questions?" Patta asked.

"Nope! Be seeing you. Coming, Melis?"

She didn't want to. But she said yes. I drove her to a taxi stand and let her out...

I HAD A reservation at the largest hotel in Heltown. I had made certain to get a room high up and facing a court. Aero-cars could hover at window level while someone opened the window. It was hard to maneuver in a court area.

I parked the car in the hotel lot, took the elevator to the lobby and picked up my reservation and key. As I started to turn from the desk the clerk said:

"Mr. Vane. A message for you, sir."

It was from Tarn. He wanted me to come to his office in the morning...

It was just another hotel room. I threw the hop a coin, yawned and tossed my bag on the bed and opened it. My special .104 explosive Colt lay under my pajamas. I put it under my pillow after I got into my bed clothes and turned out the light.

I stayed awake for some time reviewing what had happened. There were some things I knew, some I didn't and some I suspected. The pattern was taking shape, but there were still some pieces missing. One of them I would have seen during the evening had it not been for Melis Tarn. On the other hand I wouldn't have talked to Heg Patta. Not that he'd told me anything. Still I hadn't fished too badly considering there hadn't been any bait on the hook.

I was swimming in a murky pond. I wasn't alone. All about me were other fish, all with green bodies and yellow eyes and long brown hair. They kept saying, as they passed me, "No bait on the hook. No bait on the hook." Then a tall, blonde fish swam by. She had a red mouth and the kind of body fish dream about. She kept trying to light a cigarette from a .104 explosive Colt...

I guess it was the sound of my laughter that woke me up. There was a sticky-sweet smell in the room. The whiskey in my belly wanted to come up. I could see but not clearly. The walls were dancing and I wanted to close my eyes. Then there was the sound of glass breaking and I was hanging over the ledge of the window gulping air. The pillow landed with a dull thud somewhere below.

I got the shakes after a while and sat on my bed until I regained control of myself. Someone had opened a canister of cyanachloride in the room. Another few seconds and Val Vane would have been just a memory. I managed to stagger to the wall and

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found the light switch.

There it was just inside the door. It was empty. And the door was off the latch. I thought fast. Maybe I had better see this Globus Jov tonight...

I stuck my head under the cold water tap and let it go full force. I felt better after a few seconds. I put on my clothes, stuck the .104 in a spring holster on my hip and left the room. A few minutes later I was riding the now silent streets of Heltown on my way to Jov's...

HE LIVED in a ten-story co-op in the center of town. There was an automatic elevator and I took it to the seventh floor where Joy had room 753. I made sure the gun was ready for use, then knocked at the door. He was a sound sleeper. I didn't want to wake the entire floor so I shook the knob. It twisted in my fingers. I walked in. All the lights were on.

Jov was a silent sleeper all right. He was sleeping the sleep from which no one wakes. Someone had planted a sticker at the base of his skull. The tip of it was sticking out an inch or so past his lips. I knelt at his side making sure I was away from the huge pool of blood he was the center of and looked at him. He had been on the fat side but had lost so much blood he looked like an emptied sack. His features were composed as the room. I walked to the tele-audio phone and rang the district office.

A Lieutenant Saunders was the head of the detail. He was a long drink of vinegar with a face to match. He kept complaining about being stuck out here in the space-sticks.

"...Ought to kill the whole damned lot of them!" he growled. "Well, Greyson?"

Greyson was the sergeant. He was the quiet kind but I was willing to bet Saunders made most of his pinches on Greyson's fingering.

"The knife is the kind Martian freight flyers use. Just about every one of them will carry one like this. No prints. There were two of them who came...three empty glasses on the table in the kitchen and the whiskey bottle half dead. A pretty clean job, Lieutenant... "

"Oh, fine! You mean it looks like it could be an unsolved mystery? What the hell will the main office say? They like things nice and neat. You'd think we were wrappers at a store."

"Look, Saunders," I said. "I haven't had any sleep. Or food. It's six in the morning. Mind if I blow?"

He hated to say yes but he had nothing to grab me on. Had I been a Venusian private cop he'd have pulled me in. I was thankful I wasn't. He told me be sure and stick around. I said I would and beat it.

* * *

There was a tele-audio phone pay station in the co-op. I called the boss at his place. When the frame lighted up I saw I had got him out of bed. He looked pouchy under the eyes and droopy in the mouth. I suppose I looked the same to him. I gave him a quick going-over on what had happened, asked him to get some information for me and said I'd wait for his return call. He was no longer sleepy when the light went off.

He called back in ten minutes. If nothing else the boss had connections. The right ones in the right places. I got what I wanted.

Venusian barbers are the best in the Universe. I walked in to this all-night place looking and feeling like a space-bum, and walked out a new man. Breakfast in a nearby restaurant and I was ready for anything. Har

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Tarn, for instance.

The sky had developed another leak and I was pretty wet by the time I reached my car. I slid in behind the wheel, reached to close the far door and left my hand in mid-air. The door had opened and a stranger was sliding into the seat. I had no objections. Not with that deadly snub-nosed heat gun pointing at my middle.

"Anyplace I can drop you off?" I asked.

He was the quiet kind. He and Sergeant Greyson would have gotten along well together. He motioned with head and gun for me to get going. I got. He shifted the gun to his right hand and gave me a quick frisk with his left. I hated to see the .104 change hands. I knew I was going to miss it.

"Want me to just drive around or do we go somewhere?" I asked just to make talk.

He gave me directions. We pulled up before a warehouse in a rough neighborhood. He was right behind me when I slid out from behind the wheel. I caught a glimpse of silver-clouds just as they parted to let the shafts of sunlight through. I had an idea the silver lining wasn't for me. His left hand was in his jacket pocket. The heat gun made a noticeable bulge. He shook his head straight ahead and I followed orders.

THE BIG guy sitting on the crate was a Martian, the other three, Venus boys. I'd never seen any of them before.

"You get around too much," the Martian said. "We're going to make you stand still for a while. Understand?"

I understood. But why should I tell him? I shrugged my shoulders. It was a brave gesture. I didn't make the same mistake after I picked myself up off the floor. The guy behind me had slugged me with the .104.

They stood around and watched me get to my feet. This time the whiskey came up, and the breakfast with it.

"Who did you call?" the Martian asked.

I spat the nastiness from my mouth, cleared my throat and said: "A friend."

The Martian looked past me and I said quickly, "Har Tarn."

They hadn't expected that.

"There was a message telling me to call this morning. It's still in my coat pocket," I went on.

I felt fingers at my pocket and saw the Martian nod at what the man behind me did. I gripped myself, expecting another knock on the head, but it didn't come.

"What did he want?"

What the hell, I thought. *Any answer will do. If they're going to knock you off they're going to.* "He wanted to know if I saw Heg Patta or Globus Jov. I told him I'd seen both but that only Patta could talk."

The Martian stared at me with his cold eyes and I felt a shiver dance along my spine. I happened to look down at his wrist and saw something Saunders should know. His knife scabbard was empty. Abruptly he slapped a fist into a palm.

"I think they're trying to double-cross us," the Martian said. Then: "You let your hate get too big. We let ours simmer below the surface but the fire never dies out. He knows he can't do it without us. There are no Venusian space ships..."

The chill went into my belly. I suddenly remembered what the boss had said.

"Take him out and dump him somewhere!" the Martian said.

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I started to pivot. Too late. There were no fishes, no blondes in the pool of ink I fell into...

* * *

The bouncing of the car brought me out of it. For a couple of seconds I wanted to go back to the place from where I'd come. I felt nothing there.

There was a pair of feet pressing at my ribs, and another pair on my legs. My head ached and my ribs were sore. A voice floated back to us from the front seat:

"No traffic on this road. Dump him here...?"

"Might as well. Give me your gun, Miko."

"Better not. Too much noise."

"Yeah. Well, we can do it in other ways..."

I heaved a small sigh of relief. I had an idea what, "other ways" meant, but at least I'd have a chance for a fight. The car ground to a halt and the front door opened.

"...I'll give you a hand..."

I felt fingers take hold of my legs and after a moment, with the aid of the two in the rear, the man outside dragged me out. I was lying face down. I opened one eye, saw a leg at my side and went into action. The man's head hit the side of the car with a satisfying thud.

One, I counted to myself as I got to my feet. One of the two in the rear seat was coming out of the door. I helped him out by grabbing his coat collar and jerking him forward. My knee got him full in the face and I felt bones crunch in his nose. Two...

Sheer luck saved me. My foot slipped on the running board. The booming sound of a heat gun going off deafened me for a second. And the blast of heat singed the wool on my left sleeve. There is one thing about firing a heat gun. They've got an awful kick and a man has to be set for it. The guy in the back seat wasn't. The kick had knocked him off-balance.

I slapped his wrist with the side of my palm and the gun dropped to the floor. I didn't give him a chance to get it. His eyes went wide before they rolled up. I hit him a straight jab full in the throat and he gagged. He went out the second time I hit him. I shoved him out the door on his side, grabbed up the heat gun and rolled over the back of the seat into the driver's side. And I was speeding away before the first man got to his feet....

MY BOSS wasn't in when I called him from the edge of town. But the people I called afterward, were. Then I called Har Tarn.

"...Vane?" His voice was still smooth. "Good! Glad you called. I'd like for you to come to the house tonight... About ten? I think I'll have something interesting to tell you..."

I made a date, hung up and grabbed a cruising cab. I didn't want any part of the car I'd taken. The cab driver knew of a hotel close by. I was dead for lack of sleep and my head hurt from the banging it got. But my ribs no longer ached.

I left a call for seven after figuring how long a time I'd need.

It was dark and raining again when I hailed a cab. The driver drove me to a car-rental place. This time I rented an aero-car. It was a different agency from that which had rented the other car to me. I took off smoothly, circled to get my bearings and set the gyro on the course. Ten minutes later I was flying over the spacious grounds of Har Tarn's estate, and shortly after the huge home he lived in was a darker blot below.

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I landed a hundred yards from the house and walked to the house.

The same servant answered the banging of the knocker.

He ushered me into the study and said: "My master will be in shortly. Would you care for something to drink?"

I said no and folded my hands across my belly and waited Tarn's arrival. He came in shortly afterward, shook hands with a quick grasp and went around behind the desk and sat down. He seemed pleased with himself. At least that was the way I read the smile on his lips.

"Vane, I said I had something interesting to tell you. Well, I have. The stolen sections were returned to me last night. A man came to the door, Huno answered and the stranger thrust a package into his hand and ran off to a parked car in the driveway. The missing sections were in the package."

"Which means what?" I asked.

"That it all turned out well. I have the sections and the case is over for you. I will send a check in the morning..."

"Swell," I said. "Glad to hear it. There's something maybe you don't know."

The smile was still there but it was forced. "Something I should know? What?"

"Globus Jov was killed last night."

"No-o!"

"Yes. By a Martian dagger."

He said, "How terrible! Do they know who did it?"

I said, "A Martian."

"But why?"

"Because he was no longer useful. He'd given the plans to the Martian. They didn't need Jov anymore."

"I—I don't understand..."

Of course you do. A matter of double-double-cross. There were only three men who had access to the sections..."

"Three?"

"Yes. Jov, Patta, and yourself. Patta stole the plans, Jov found out, figured he'd be blamed anyway, and..."

Tarn's mouth was hanging open and his eyes were wide and staring.

"...Came to you. He'd said he'd go to the authorities but you stopped him. You said you'd get a private investigator, use an Earth agency; that way no Venusian would get wise. That satisfied Jov. All he wanted was to be in the clear."

"Vane! I think you've gone mad!"

THIS TIME *I* smiled. Some of what I'd said was pure guesswork. Jov was dead, after all. But I was pretty sure. "Yeah! I'm mad, all right. Not in the way you think. But let me go on. You got panicky and called Patta and told him what had happened. That was where the double-double cross came in. The easy way. Tell the Martian Jov had the plans. I think it was done this way. Patta copied the plans and gave Jov the original set. Jov wouldn't be fooled by duplicates. I think Jov was weak. At any rate he was talked into dealing with the Martian. So Jov died last night.

"But Patta still had the set of duplicates. They were the last of the complete set. Now Venus could make the super-atomic rifle. And attack Terra! Venus could get revenge for the beating Terra had given her. But without ships Venus couldn't fight except in defense. So Patta made a deal with the Martian. He'd give him the set of duplicates if Mars would furnish the space ships. Damn! You guys are suckers!"

"I said I thought you were mad

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and I think so more than ever now," Tarn said. He was making the familiar circles around his lips again. "Why should Patta do that?"

"I made a call yesterday," I said "It takes two years to draw up a complete set of plans. It takes six months to build the rifle. That's what I was told. Patta wanted you to hold off as long as possible, then tell Terra the plans had been stolen. You agreed, then got cold feet and called our agency in. You figured if we got hold of Jov and Patta and maybe the plans before the Martian got them it would put you in the clear. Maybe make you a hero. As you said, 'I am the most powerful and richest man on Venus...' But only by sufferance of Terra. You were satisfied to let it remain that way..."

"Excellent!"

My hand sneaked toward my hip.

"Come, now, Vane," the voice said. "You don't think I'd let you pull a gun, do you?"

I lifted both hands high. Tarn had turned a sickly shade of green. He was staring past me toward the door.

"Melis!" he groaned.

I turned. Patta, Jacka and Melis were coming into the room. Melis closed the door behind her.

"Get his gun, Jacka," Patta said.

"Mind if I get my hands down?" I asked.

"Of course," Patta said. "As I said before, excellent! I'm curious, however. How did you catch on?"

Jack was putting the gun in his hip pocket. He had me covered with his own. He looked like he would love to use it on me. Patta slid a chair over for Melis and used the rounded corner on the desk as a stool. He faced me.

"Well...?" he urged.

"It wasn't too hard. Melis must have heard her father call the agency. She contacted you and you met me. There's only the one road leading into Heltown. I had to use it. So you waited."

"But how did you know?"

I SMILED. I was stalling for time. "First, you were using an aero-coupe not a car. Second, Melis' hair was dry but her raincoat was wet. She must have been standing at the curve just before where you were parked and when she saw my headlights she wanted to make sure I was the one, so she tailed me to the house and waited outside. Fourth, she's your wife!"

Patta clapped his hands. "Wonderful! How did you know she's my wife?"

"She lit her cigarette and I saw the faded spot on her finger where the marriage band usually fitted. She was afraid for you when I was questioning you and her hands were trembling."

He shook his head in admiration.

I went on: "You even told her to kiss me and leave her personal card. You knew it would set me off on another tangent. Or at least you hoped it would. Melis was prepared to go all the way, so long as you were in the clear."

He sighed. "It's a shame we have to kill you, Vane. But you know too much."

"I even know Jacka wasn't drunk last night. He followed me to the hotel where I'd made a reservation. It was easy enough. It was raining again and there wasn't much traffic. He parked the aero-coupe checked at the desk for my room number and let himself in. He set off the canister of cyanachloride and beat it. Of course you knew you'd failed when the Martian's boys spotted me at Jov's place."

"Complete. To the last detail.

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Enough to get us all hung higher than Tarn Hall's masthead. A pity you won't be able to use it. All right, Jacka..."

"Wait!" Har Tarn said hoarsely. "You—you can't kill him here."

"We don't intend to. He has an aero-coupe parked on the lawn. Jacka and I will take him for a flight. He'll have an accident and fall."

I could see the look of relief in Tarn's face.

"And from now on I'm running Velanium Inc.," Patta went on. "Understand?"

"My dear boy. Of course. Anything you say."

He was a frightened old man.

"Let's go, Jacka," Patta gave the signal.

They forgot one thing. Me. They must have thought me crazy to think I'd hold still. Melis was in the chair. She was closest to me. I got to her before Jacka or Patta even thought what I intended. I had my arms around her and was moving sideways so that she was constantly in the line of fire. Jacka moved away from the door and let me at it. I kept her close to me as I opened it with one hand. I stepped back into the clear. One foot, two, and I was where I could kick the door closed.

The shuffling of feet behind me warned me in time. I whirled with the girl. She gasped as the long blade went into her breast and sagged limply in my arms. I dropped her and hit Huno with a chopping right, knocking him to one side. Then I was sprinting for the door.

Shots exploded behind me. Something whacked my shoulder and sent me spinning. The door was a yard or two away and another shot got me a flesh wound in the side. Then the door burst inward, men in uniform piled in, there was a lot of shooting, most of it I didn't hear because I went down and hit my head on the edge of the door...

* * *

"...THOSE we didn't get at that fly-joint," Greyson said, "we got at the space port. The Martian had the plans on him. Both sets. Guess we came here in time."

"But how did you know I was here?" I asked. They'd set me up on a sofa and Greyson was with me while an ambulance and doctor were on their way.

"Your car was still in front of the warehouse where they took you. I figured you would rent another. There are only three agencies in town."

Smart boy, that Greyson, I thought. "And the girl...?"

He shook his head.

It was funny, I thought as they rolled me into the ambulance. They all wanted the easy way. And the easy way was always the hardest...

ARNHEM DISCOVERY

★ **By June Lurie** ★

BECAUSE a group of American and Australian scientists recently returned from the wild country of northern Australia, it is no longer such a mysterious place. They brought back with them 350 birds and 460 animals and more than 10,000 fish, most of them previously unknown to naturalists. In addition to the wild life, the scientists studied the natives. This wild north country, called Arnhem Land, is the home of aborigines who live just as their ancestors did many centuries ago. Many of the aborigines helped the exploring party. The women and children helped collect birds and insects and small animals, while the men of the tribe acted as guides through the dense bush country. One of the most interesting discoveries of the trip was a hatchet used during the Stone Age. This was the first time a hatchet of that era—100,000 B.C. to 4000 B.C.—has ever been unearthed.

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READER'S PAGE

IT MUST HAVE BEEN GOOD!

Sirs:

Allah be praised! I have just finished "The Usurpers" by Geoff St. Reynard in the January issue and would like to say that it is super science-fiction—a classical classic—and every word of it a 100% masterpiece.

Top on my list of favorite stories in FA and AS used to be Alex Blade's "The Brain". Alex will have to be content with second place since the coming of "The Usurpers"!

The other stories in the issue were so far overshadowed by Geoff St. Reynard that I won't even comment on them.

I see you are finally giving us some bright, colorful covers, as of the past two issues. Swell. —And here's to the coming issues!

Jerry Copher
4763 Cupples Pl.
St. Louis 13, Mo.

Your enthusiasm is contagious, Jerry, and well founded. The St. Reynard story was tops for our money too.....Ed.

THE BEST IN THREE YEARS

Sirs:

I am unmistakably irked, peeved, and disappointed. My usual polished epistle was missing from the January issue of FA. Now I ask you, is that fair? But having the utmost faith and confidence in your kind soul, I maintain that this little item *will* make its appearance. It should, anyway—what's the *Reader's Page* coming to with 75% of it taken over by Paul of Ganley's letters!

But now for the current issue. The January FA, believe it or not, has been *the best* in about three years. And upon reviewing this month's offerings I was not only surprised, but remarkably pleased. Being a veteran of some 10 years of science-fantasy reading, my comment is not based on my opinion of one or two stories only—*but the whole issue!*

One reason may have been that there was a great deal of variety in the story matter offered. Another may have been the authors themselves: St. Reynard, Francis, Recour, Livingston, Browning, and—of all people, the deCourcys. I won't go into detail commenting on any story in particular, because that would be only superfluous. Let's just say—*more, please!*

Before closing I wish to state that membership is open to all fantasy fans in the SCIENCE-FANTASY SOCIETY. (Formerly known as the Science Fantasy Correspondence Trading Club.) We wish to gather together a good and strong following of those who are interested in all aspects of matters related to stfantasy literature. Members can take part in a variety of activities, from bartering on back number copies of all stf pubs, to writing articles and letters for our several publications. So why not join up, fans?

Calvin Thomas Beck
Hotel Flanders
135 West 47th St.
New York 19, N.Y.

Gosh, Cal, all those nice things you said about the January issue have just about left us speechless with delight. So why say any more except—thanks! .....Ed.

GEOFF'S MECHANICAL BRAIN

Sirs:

First let me say thanks for printing my last letter. ...I guess you don't get very much mail...?

"The Usurpers" in the January issue was a classic. You know, I think that Geoff St. Reynard has a mechanical brain with a built-in typewriter. All he has to do is turn a crank and fantasy classics come out by the ream.

Along these lines I pity the poor science-fiction fan these days. He not only has to keep a sharp eye out for deroes and malignant flying saucers, but now he has to find out whether or not his neighbors are red-spotted toads or green dragons!

As to the other stories in the issue, "The Golden Mask of Agharti" was an excellent story in an excellent series. And does Rog Phillips really look like that illo on page 87?

Theodore Sturgeon next issue? I won't believe it until I see it!

Brian McNaughton
198 Bergen Pl.
Red Bank, N.J.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 152)

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Do Unseen Powers Direct Our Lives?

ARE the tales of strange human powers false? Can the mysterious feats performed by the mystics of the Orient be explained away as only illusions? Is there an intangible bond with the universe beyond which draws mankind on? Does a mighty Cosmic intelligence from the reaches of space ebb and flow through the deep recesses of the mind, forming a river of wisdom which can carry men and women to the heights of personal achievement?

Have You Had These Experiences?

. . . . that unmistakable feeling that you have taken the wrong course of action, that you have violated some inner, unexpressed, better judgment. The sudden realization that the silent whisperings of self are cautioning you to keep your own counsel—not to speak words on the tip of your tongue in the presence of another. That something which pushes you forward when you hesitate, or restrains you when you are apt to make a wrong move.

These urges are the subtle *influence* which when understood and directed has made thousands of men and women masters of their lives. There IS a source of intelligence within you as natural as your senses of sight and hearing, and more dependable, which you are NOT using now! Challenge this statement! Dare the Rosicrucians to reveal the functions of this Cosmic mind and its great possibilities to you.

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(*CONTINUED FROM PAGE 150*).

Confidentially, Brian, that illo on page 87 is rather deceptive. You spoke of the red-spotted toads and green dragons, remember? Well we've heard that Rog is one of those "neighbors" you shudder about! How do we know this? Well, it seems that the last time our art department had him pose for a drawing, they shot a photo of him sitting in a chair beside a window. The developed picture showed a beautiful window and—an empty chair. ...The Defense rests.....Ed.

MORE FANTASY

Sirs:

I hope that you will print this letter in the Reader's Page of FA, as it is the first one I have ever written although I have never missed an issue of FA. I think that FA is about the best magazine in its field printed today. But I do have one gripe, which I'd like to air here.

I think there is too much concentration on science in the stories. I like the solid type of fantasy—that makes you think, and wonder—a—little. Fantasy leaves a nice feeling with you, one that science in a story seems to lack. So I'm putting in my bid here for more Fantasy in FA. And I'd also like to contact any readers who are really interested in fantasy—even to the extent of the weird and occult.

Floy Sanders
Plant City, Fla.

If you will have noted, Floy, FA is presenting a great deal more of the pure fantasy type story lately. And all we'll say right now is keep your eye on future issues. We've got some really top-notch fantasies coming up—by the biggest names in the field!.....Ed.

FROM DESPERATION TO JOY

Sirs:

Two weeks ago I was sitting around the house with nothing to do, and no favorite western magazines to read, when through sheer desperation to while away the time I borrowed a copy of FA from a friend of mine who I thought didn't know better than to buy such trash.

What a jolt I got!

How long has this magazine been in circulation? Is it possible to get back issues from the publisher? This small town I live in doesn't have a second hand magazine shop. The friend I borrowed my copy from stands idly by while the maid throws out old issues by the dozen—and I have never thought to read one of them before! Oh how I mourn the lost reading pleasure this means!

Being a comparative rookie in the field I suppose my comments may not mean much. But I thought that in the January issue "The Usurpers" and "Revolt In Pacifico" were the best and tied for first place. The other stories, all good, ranked: "Jirandel", "The Crumbling World", "The Golden Mask of Agharti", "The Man Who Could Not Die", "The Exteroceptor Deceptor", and "Sanctuary".

So more power to a fine magazine. I'll see you next month and every month thereafter. I am now a disciple...addict...ardent follower...and in the vernacular of the street: "I'm a hog about FA!"

Jim Parks, Jr.
Bud Chitwood
283 Hancock Ave.
Athens, Georgie

Say — Jim — Bud — we don't know just who was desperately joyful with a double signature! But anyway, welcome into the fold, and as to back number magazines, we're sure there are many FA fans who will contact you and tell you how to go about securing back copies. Oh yes, confidentially, we're hogs about FA too!..Ed.

HE WANTS CONTROVERSY

Sirs:

Hah! I am questioned—what I said in my last letter concerning the necessity for a general feud within the *Reader's Page* in order to stir up fan interest in writing for and enlarging same has come about without need of my intervention!

Well, to the fore! En garde, villain!

1. I made no contention that the story from which I claimed Shaver lifted his plot of the moon bouncing was not, as you said, lousy. In fact, it was the worst of the stories I ever read in my life! But that isn't the point at all. It is the fact that Shaver lifted most of his plot from it. You may say that 90% of the story was independent of the questionable part, and that much is true perhaps, but most every story written is independent of the original idea it is spawned from. I believe that proves my first point, that the idea could have been lifted.

2. I'm glad nobody has ever accused the author of stories concerning the rotundity of Terra of plagiarizing from Columbus, because Columbus took the idea from the ancient Greek philosophers who were intelligent enough to seek logical answers to many questions, which, unfortunately they could not apply to a practical use. Which is strictly beside the point. All I'd like Brian McNaughton to tell me is what

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stories he's read of the Earth being round, because they're probably very interesting fantasy. (Any BEM knows that the Earth is square!)

3. The difference between stories written about the Earth being round, and those written about the Moon bouncing from the Earth at some past era is precisely this: that the Earth is in truth round is a known fact, and is therefore the property of no individual; however, that Luna once "bounced" from the Earth's surface and rebounded into her orbit, is merely a tapestry of fiction. It is an event that some ingenious person dreamed up, and as such, at least morally, belongs to that person.

4. I contend further that our moon could not have rebounded with such force that it would leave its orbit to fly into outer space —*after having lost most of its energy at the beginning anyway!* And further, the Moon would, probably never have reached the Earth anyway, since the gravitational strains would have torn it to pieces ere it could do so.

So much for that. Sorry for such a long spiel, but you asked for it, ed! I see you're featuring Ted Sturgeon next issue. Hail the rejuvenated FA!

As to the current issue: "The Usurpers" was the best by far. Yes, I did enjoy this yarn much more than I did "Five Years In the Marmalade." —That to the author and thanks, Geoff for the card.

The other yarns were good, so enough said. None bad. And that's all for now.

W. Paul Ganley
119 Ward Rd.
North Tonawanda, N. Y.

We're going to leave the answering of your various points up to Brian, Paul. — Except maybe we'll add one little point that may be food for thought. Did it ever occur to you that the same writer may have penned both yarns? Now hold it, we didn't say a thing—did we?.....Ed.

AMONG THE MODERN CLASSICS

Sirs:

I have just completed Geoff St. Reynard's masterful work, "The Usurpers" in the January FA, and have been strongly impressed with it. The concept of aliens masquerading in human form is not at all new; it was handled admirably in Don Stuart's "Who Goes There?" a few years ago. But this story was not at all like Stuart's. It was different, and as powerful. I was somewhat disappointed by the inconclusive ending, which may indicate that St. Reynard was unable to devise a satisfactory ending conquering the aliens as Stuart did. Another minor flaw was the

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blurred characterization of the aliens on their motive for "usurping" Earth. However, I feel that this is one of the best stories to be published in FA in the past two years and ranks with "Forever Is Too Long" and "This Way To Heaven". It is a minor modern stf classic. How St. Reynard turns out such different yarns is beyond me, and I've paid quite a bit of attention to his stories in studying construction of same with an eye to my own writing ambitions. Geoff is definitely a scholar; his lengthy and appropriate quotations from Shakespeare bear that out—and they fit. He has a flair for the unusual. "Five Years In the Marmalade" was definitely an off-the-beaten-track yarn. But St. Reynard is unknown beyond the pages of FA. Could he by chance be a pen-name for one of our eds?

A few other comments. Naylor's cover, while having little to do with the story, was a masterpiece of coloring. That girl must have been chilly in that jeweled band-aid she wore on the staircase! —Oh the lucky monster coming down the steps behind her!

I thought the story by the deCourcys was unique in at least one respect—it included the name of a prominent author as one of the main characters. "Rog Phillips" was not spelled correctly, probably intentionally, but it was still an interesting story.

Is Robert Moore Williams related to W. Robert Moore who writes for the *National Geographic?*

About this moon bouncing business: How about a story of how a dero, under telaug influence, caused the moon to bounce by crashing his flying saucer into the satellite, thereupon making an atomic mutant involuntarily immortal and driving him to hide five years in the marmalade! Wow! Get Rog Phillips to add some tangential semanticism to that yarn, call its chief character the *Scravvzek,* and run it as a 3 million word serial in 1951.

Robert Silverberg
760 Montgomery St.
Brooklyn 13, N.Y.

About the ending of St. Reynard's story. We feel it was stronger as the author wrote it, leaving food for thought, as it were. Along these lines, why must the villain or aliens always be destroyed? Won't you remember Geoff's story a lot longer because it ended the way it did? As to W. Robert Moore, we can't say if it is the same writer, although we doubt it. And your bouncing-marmalade-mutant-Scravvzek gives us shudders.....Ed.

OF NEWTON'S LAW—AND THINGS

Sirs:

I am very glad to see that FA is on the upward trend again. The magazine has been getting steadily better and everything indicates toward "good times ahead".

The January issue was the best for a long time, and with the book-length novel by Theodore Sturgeon coming up next month, (my favorite writer) I look forward eagerly to future issues.

Getting back to the current issue. It is almost excellent. I say almost because although the writing is fine, the plots, especially the fantasy plots, are somewhat stereotyped. This is not true of "The Usurpers" however. Geoff St. Reynard is blossoming into a fine writer, and he always comes up with fine ideas. "The Usurpers" was a new approach to a rarely used theme.

"Revolt In Pacifico" was another swell story, although it might have been better if Mr. Ott had gone a bit easier on the love angle.

I had not previously credited the de Courcys with the ability to write a story quite as bad as "The Golden Mask of Agharti", which was a sorry attempt at the expense of the various science-fictional figures concealed in the plot. The authors can do much better, I'm sure.

Besides the stories, I'd like to make a few remarks for the Reader's Page. First of all, I make an urgent plea against long novels—except for exceptional works. Too many novels are mediocre. So please give us only occasional—but terrific ones.

I would also like to point out something in connection with a statement made by Brian McNaughton in his letter concerning the "Cyclopean" story, in which the Moon bounced off the Earth. Said Mr. McNaughton: "...it could be true that the Moon might have struck the Earth with cataclysmic force and rebounded, many years ago."

Come now, friend Brian, knowest ye not Newton's Third Law of Motion? This law states that for every action there is an accompanying reaction of equal force, pointing in the opposite direction. The Moon, if it fell, might possibly have rebounded, but it would have sent the Earth scooting God-knows-where full speed ahead. Luna herself would be in no good condition after traveling through several hundred miles of atmosphere, smashing into the Earth, and going through the atmosphere again. The Moon wouldn't have fused like a meteor, but she would have been slenderized. ...But all this is useless conjecture anyway, since gravity is a sure thing, and the Moon wouldn't have bounced in the first place!

Morton D. Paley
1455 Townsend Ave.
New York 52, N.Y.

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About the novels. We guarantee that you'll get the best in long length stories in FA—and by the best we mean just that. Top stories by the top writers. What more can you ask for? What more can we ask for! It would seem that poor Brian is going to have his hands filled with bouncing moons. O.K. Brian, let's see you juggle them! ..... Ed.

ALL IS FORGIVEN

Sirs:

In my letter concerning "The Beacons Must Burn" which you were kind enough to publish, I stated something about "the strong gravity of Io", which error you pointed out. How I made such an obvious mistake I do not know, especially as I was thinking of the exact opposite case, the weakness of Io's pull.

Although the satellite's diameter is 1.07 times that of the Moon, and its mass is 1.09 times greater, the hero was racing around as if in a normal environment, for him, anyway, of a gravity acceleration of 32 feet per second per second. He'd probably only weigh about 1/6 of his Earth weight, yet the author forgot to mention it.

To get down to this issue, "The Usurpers" was a good story, but not up to the author's "Blue Bottle Fly". However, it was good enough to be one of the best stories in the issue. "The Man Who Could Not Die" was fantasy all the way through, and not too good fantasy at that. "Jirandel" was fair. It should have been a longer story. "Sanctuary" was average as far as plot goes, but the characterization was handled rather cleverly. "The Exteroceptor Deceptor" was nothing to rave about.

Did Rog Phillips give you warning that he was going to be cast as a not too bright Watson in "The Golden Mask of Agharti"? It was not too bad stf. "Revolt In Pacifico" and "The Crumbling World" were average stories, nothing earthshaking, nothing too bad.

On the whole a well rounded issue.

Kernan O'Brien
186-29 Avon Rd.
Jamaica 3, L.I. N.Y.

Your ranking of the "Usurpers" below "Blue Bottle Fly" is an interesting observation. We'd like to know how the rest of you readers feel about that. ...But actually, one thing seems to be true.. Geoff St. Reynard has written three very popular stories in recent months, "Blue Bottle Fly", "Five Years In the Marmalade", and "The Usurpers". It's very rare when one author is pitted against himself for selection of the best story! Oh, yes, about St. Reynard. Keep your eyes peeled for some big news about him coming up soon!.....Ed.

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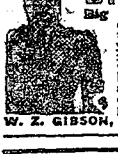

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TEMPLE OF TERROR

★ By Milton Matthew ★

HARRIGAN tried not to be furtive. He posed his features in the look of angelic goodness typified by any visitor to the Temple of Light. He toyed with the pamphlet eulogizing Franee, the beautiful Founder and periodically he would raise his head and gaze adoringly at the gigantic three-dimensional image of the woman, which was the alter of the Lighters.

Inwardly his mind was racing like a jet. He knew every nook and cranny of the temple—almost as well as the architect who had designed it—maybe better. Service had briefed him thoroughly.

"We've got to have time," Richards had said back in the Service headquarters. "Remember all the she-devil has to do is touch a stud. Then the whole thing will go."

Harrigan visualized the entire Moon shuddering, then moving as a gigantic projectile toward Terra, driven by the monstrous engines buried beneath the Temple here in Luna City. The fantastic fanatic, Franee, Founder of the Temple of Light and high-priestess of horror was planning to commit the grandest sacrifice of all. Her warped mind, backed with the hideous perversions of science and scientists who believed the rot she dished out, had conceived of this unbelievable gesture. And he, Harrigan, had to stop it. Thank God, that Service had gotten wind of it from a neophyte who had broken under Interrogation!

For months Harrigan had undergone this rigorous implantation as a neophyte himself. And the time was coming when he has to act. It was here and now.

He moved slightly in the pew, and he felt the comforting bulges beneath his flowing outer garment. Two Type-Q atomics nestled there, but they had to be planted in the heart of the powerful warp-motors to destroy them so no damage to either the Moon—or even Terra—could be done.

Harrigan decided to play it bold. He rose from the pew and nonchalantly walked to the elevators toward Quarters. The guards recognizing a Neophyte let him through with the usual, "Blessed be Franee," and Harrigan trembled with relief as the elevator dropped him into the depths.

With a soft whine it stopped. Harrigan stepped out. With a blaster he shot down the two guards. The surprise was so complete there was no chance of outcry. Running madly Harrigan dashed through doors, in and out of corridors, through three elevator stages, praying that the pursuit would not nail him before he had his chance.

He cut down three more men who interfered with his progress and in minutes he was before the doors which had been described in such detail to him. Using a Sounder, he went to work on the locks. In seconds he was through. He was staggered by the sight of the vast warp-drive. Now he could well believe that this monstrous machine could set a planet in motion!

Harrigan had been trained with one purpose in mind. He knew what Fate awaited him. There was not the slightest chance of his coming out alive. It was just as well to die with the bombs as under the torturers' tools.

He hurled both toward the base of the drive, a hundred feet below him. And then Harrigan died, died quickly and painlessly in an atomic blast which sent steel running like water and in whose ensuing holocaust, all things animate and inanimate, vanished in vapors.

On the surface, the huge edifice called the "Temple Of Light", rose slightly and then settled into a distorted mass of steel and stone. The high-priestess, Franee and her weird plan had ended.

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FABLES FROM THE FUTURE

By Lee Owens

OPENING GAMBIT

SO FAR AS the casual eye could discern, the man was a non-entity. Even to the trained eye of the station detective, there was nothing to excite curiosity in the appearance or the manner or the bearing of the man with the suitcase.

He was heavy set which made him look less tall than he really was. There was an absorbed, introspective air about him. A guesser might have said, "look at the professor," and they wouldn't have been far wrong.

At the exit of the station, the man stopped and put down his suitcase. He drew a package of cigarettes from an outer pocket and lit one, glancing about casually. An extraordinarily acute observer might have noticed that he stood peculiarly with the suitcase between his legs, almost as if he were afraid it would be snatched from him.

It was late and not train time so no rush of people engulfed the man. He picked up his suitcase and walked slowly toward the concourse where a passing cab paused for him.

"Crayton Arms," the man said to the cab-driver in perfect English marred only by the peculiar perfection some foreigners give to the language when they've learned it well.

Anyone who watched this innocent tableau might have seen three men step forward as the stranger entered the cab, and a few seconds later might have noticed that four automobiles seemed to follow in the wake of the cab.

When the cab drew up before the hotel, the graceful stranger stepped out, paid his fare and entered the hotel. Registration was a matter of seconds.

The man followed the bell-hop who seemed to sag considerably—unusually so—under the weight of the suitcase.

Once inside the room, the stranger quickly tipped the bell-hop and sent him on his way.

Then the air of calmness and lethargy dropped from him. He bent over the suitcase. His hands moved quickly to a small flap on the outside. He did something underneath the flap.

He straightened up and a smile crossed his face. He left the suitcase in the middle of the room and opened the door to the corridor. He stepped out.

Two men standing just outside quietly pinioned his arms to his side and another

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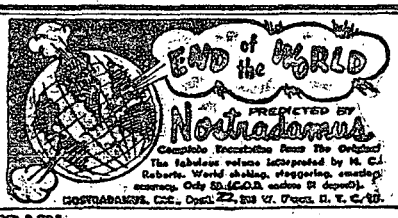
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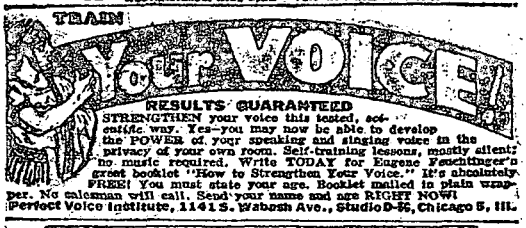
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two materialized from nowhere.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" the stranger asked angrily, but there was the livid white tones of fear reflected in his face.

"Come with us. We arrest you as a foreign agent..."

Two other men were already in the hotel room and one immediately got down on his knees and poured over the nondescript suitcase. He found the same flap. His hands moved quietly and surely.

"That's that," he said finally to his companion, "that boy was ready to start it." He hefted the suitcase experimentally as if to judge its weight. "Enough 'pluto' to blast the city," he said laconically. "Well, this is another time it won't happen."

The other shook his head; "We were really lucky." He stepped closer to his friend. "Can we always stop them in time?..."

☆ ☆ ☆

THE ONES WHO CAME BEFORE

EVEN THROUGH the pile of boulders before the cave's entrance, gusts of wind came driving. The fire flickered under the icy impact and cast grotesque shadows on the walls. The quiet little group of humans huddled closer together for warmth and one old crone muttered under her breath, "Aiee, the coolth is always with us."

A man broke away from the confines of the group. He was tall and lean under the heavy layers of skins and his hand clenched a spear-haft firmly.

"Listen to me," he called angrily and his voice echoed in the narrow confines, "listen to me! We must all go into the Place. If we do not go, we will die. There is no food and there is no heat. How long can we feed this feeble fire."

Another figure stood up. "You are wrong, Kah. We cannot go. It is the law. Did not the Ones Who Came Before say that no men could go into the places? Aye, they did. And some of us didn't believe them. Do you remember the stories of the children born to those who disobeyed?"

"But that is changed," Kah shouted angrily in retort. "That was much time before. Now the Places are clean and free from the taint. We must go!"

"How do you know the Places are free?" the oldster questioned Kah craftily.

The young man's defiance wilted for a moment—then he thrust his jaw out. "Because I have been there," he said. "Yes, I, Kah, the same as you, have been in the Places. And they are warm and there is food in the funny stones, and there is shelter. I have seen and used them!"

The small group of humans listened listlessly to the argument between Kah and the Oldster. They disdained to take sides only because they were hungry and cold and feeble. And the Law of course was

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strong in them.

"The Law says you must die, Kah," the Old man said shrewdly, "for you have broken the Law." He spat. "The Ones Who Came Before warned us many times."

"You fool!" Kah stormed. "You will die here with the rest. I will lead all of you into the Place and we will live there always. If we stay here you know most of you will die—the old ones and the women and the children. Only we young men will live. Have we anything to lose even if I am wrong?—which I am not!"

That swayed the balance. The pitiful groups moved slowly toward Kah. "We will go with you Kah," they said. "Promise us heat and food."

And five hours later, the small band of humans entered the forbidding magnificence of the Place. Mountains of metal and strange materials surrounded them—everywhere their was wonder. But the Place was dead. Already decay was beginning to set in.

Kah led the band masterfully to a "cave"—and it was warm. Kah brought out huge quantities of metal stones, which when broken open yielded rich foods. Kah showed them the comforts of which they had only dreamed. And the Bad Babies came to none of them, unlike what the One Who Came Before had warned.

Instead the tribe prospered and grew and learned. For the Place was good.

And Kah played with strange things, unknowing that some day we would be able to read in the strange carvings in the stones of the Place, the story of the Radioactive Dust...

☆ ☆ ☆

CRASH LANDING!

I'M A CLERK at Intercontinental. That's my job. It's not much of one. I'd rather be seated in the bucket of a Lunar Special or taking a Martian drag, but I can't pass the medical—my heart—so I do the next best thing. I spend a lot of my time off on the observation platforms at Cheyenne One, which, as everyone knows, is the major North American Space Port.

So much for me. What I want to tell about is the recent tragedy, the crack-up of the "Cobalt" the fast Venus-Terra liner. I was there the Saturday morning she came in.

What a sight that was! I was sitting in the glass-encased observation tower listening to the speakers drone the usual drivel of arrival and departure, but my ears pricked up when I heard, "...Cobalt—Venus-Terra, coming in on dock seven. Clear air—crews alert."

Overhead, the sleek slim needle that was the System's fastest passenger rocket, slid into view, as the pilot prepared to land. The rocket's forejets braked her overhead, and skillfully the pilot tipped her over so

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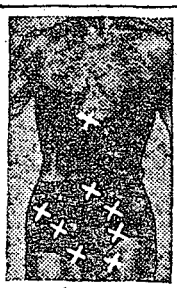

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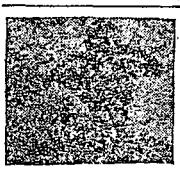

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that she stood on her tail, in the conventional landing-maneuver which is as old as rockets themselves.

Slowly and gracefully, the four-hundred foot needle of polished titanium, that was the "Cobalt" settled itself dockward. I could just imagine the proud sensation the pilot must have felt as he set her downwards, under the eyes of ten thousand people, knowing he was the object of their envy.

He was an old hand. The rocket moved slowly, but with assurance. Its tail was pinpointed for the dock. On a sliver of flame it was balanced, its internal gyros holding it erect.

Every eye was on the proud ship. No one saw the initial movements of the fool who caused the tragedy. The rocket was balanced at perhaps five hundred feet and was descending rapidly. Then abruptly every eye caught the intruder.

Hurtling right toward the nose of the ship, was a stubby freighter, a common carrier of uncertain lineage. There were no survivors of it, so we can't ever learn the cause or the reason for the freighter's direction, but the surviving pilot said, that when his radar screamed "object!" he nearly died then and there.

He made one frantic effort to throw power to the "Cobalt" in a mad effort to send it hurtling upwards and away from the projectile that was about to strike it. But it was too late. You can't imagine the hideous sound when the two vessels met. There was such a grinding of tortured metal that you'd think the ships were crying aloud.

The rest is anti-climactic. Both plunged earthward and in their striking pulverized a dozen acres of field. It was a miracle that as many survived as did, but the safety chambers and the acceleration tables helped a lot.

When I went home that evening, I was left with a feeling of wonder, and even now, when the spaceways tempt me, I recall the accident. Yet, I know I'd sell my soul to be in the shoes of the men who man the rockets...

★ ★ ★

FLAT-TOP KILLER!

BUZZ PUSHED "transmit" and spoke calmly into the microphone though his heart was pounding:

"Red flat-top sighted in radar eight hundred miles off coast. We are at eighty-thousand feet. Am about to take offensive action—over!"

"They're not monitoring us, Buzz," Harris said, "they can't pick us up!"

"*Won't* pick us up, Jack," Buzz said sharply. "They're playing it real safe—the fools. Who the hell worries about international complications when they've got a flat-top launcher loaded with rockets. The hell with orders. We'll attack!"

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Eighty thousand feet below the jet patrol bomber and thirty miles away lay the Red monster. Over it floated an umbrella of fighters while on the deck the grotesque shapes of the gigantic rocket launchers stuck their ugly snouts into the air. A hundred ships of every variety existed in the flotilla. Closer to the coast than this they need not come. The devastation of the rockets from the huge carrier would make mince-meat of the coastal cities. And the surprise would be complete. They'd be troops in the shambles of Seattle and 'Frisco and Los Angeles in three days!

High and remote, out of radar contact, isolated by the thick cloud-banks, the jet bomber rolled serenely on.

"Got their coordinates on the nose, Jack," Buzz asked his navigator.

"The computer's swallowing the data right now. This ought to be good."

"Here goes!" Buzz said exultantly as he pressed the firing stud. The plane lifted slightly as the weight of the four guided missels left it. Four slim, narrow-winged projectiles slid under rocket power from the belly of the jet plane. At the same time the bomber opened wide its engines and headed east. There was always the chance of interception in spite of the enormous speed and altitude of the craft.

The four needle-nosed rockets tailed burning flames as their velocities built up. At sixty thousand feet over the Red flotilla, the strange missiles dipped sharply in unison. The relays cut in and the motors opened wide. Speeds built up sharply until they were moving at an incredible pace, guided by nothing but the set of their electronic brains tantalized by the co-ordinates fed into them. Unerringly they shot downward. They moved of course faster than sound and the radars of the Reds caught them only for a fleeting instant. By then it was too late to counter with anti-missiles.

In the fleeting jet, Buzz and Jack watched the screens. Anxiously they waited as the seconds ticked by, seconds which lengthened into minutes. Finally it happened. Clearly and perfectly, the monstrous mushroom appeared in the screens, and with incredible rapidity it rose into the sky, probing it like some gigantic finger. The Red flotilla was done...

Grimly and unsmilingly Buzz shook Jack's hand. "Thank God!" he said fervently, "the rats carried atomics..."

★ ★ ★

DO UNTO OTHERS...

JIM MORLAND relaxed comfortably with the tall cool drink at his side. The aluminum hut was cool and inside there was no hint of the steaming jungle heat, for the refrigerators threw the B.T.U's away. Jim listened to the pleasant throb of the compressors and thought that the Venusian

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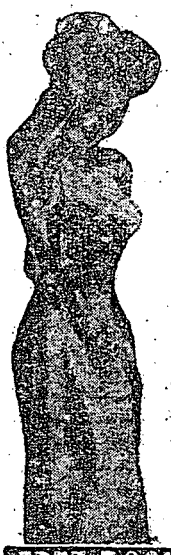

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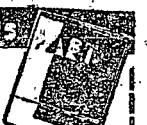

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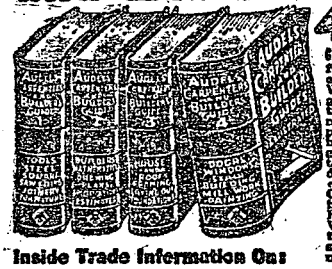

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life wasn't bad at all.

He glanced at the chests at the side of the room. They were crammed to the top with *soron*, that weed-like substance from which the medicos pulled a variety of hormones. On Earth it was worth its weight in polonium.

He'd been shrewd, Jim mentally congratulated himself. Dealing with these stupid primitive people was a cinch. Here they were working like slaves for him, in return for the cheap and shoddy baubles he'd brought with him—utensiles, fish-hooks, nets, rubber tubing, pikes, and an odd assortment of junk.

At New Cinn they'd warned traders and colonial to play square with the natives. Bah! What for? They were happy with their junk. As soon as the Earthman was gone, and when the shoddy stuff had fallen to pieces, the seal-like Venerians would go back to their simple ways forgetting all about the men whom they had dealt with. Those crazy warnings of the Colonial authorities were just a ruse to make sure traders spent a lot.

Morland glanced at the calender. The rocket was due in seven more days. He'd collected enough soron to make him happy for a long time with the credits it'd bring. He was going to get out of this swamp once and for all.

The scratching at the aluminum door of the hut resumed. He went to it and opened it. Framed in it was the four foot seal-like Venerian. It held a wooden box filled with rusty little pieces of metal which Morland recognized as fish-hooks he'd traded a few weeks ago. The creature held it out supplicatingly. Without a word Morland closed the door. For a while the scratching continued. Then it stopped.

A few hours later he was making his last trek. He moved slowly through the muddy ooze underfoot. His reference was the little radar beacon in the cabin. It was a double job so that nothing could go wrong. There was chance of his getting lost, in "radio" light of the two beams.

It wasn't hard to dispose of his "goods". The ignorant natives willingly gave soron for the shoddiest mass of junk. Morland had been out about four hours and the steaming stickiness of the mud-suit was beginning to bother him. Now was the time to go back.

He turned up the volume of his little head-set, expecting to catch the usual buzz. But there was no sound! The radar beacon must have failed! Frantically Morland moved, running up and down trying to find a reference point. But there are no references in the Venerian jungles...

Morland never did find the beacon. Three days later his exhausted terrified body sank beneath the softening mud, marked momentarily by an air bubble...

And a little while later, a Venerian removed the blanket of mud from the tower atop an empty aluminum hut...

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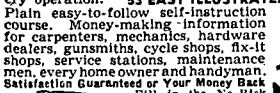

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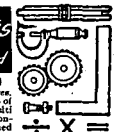

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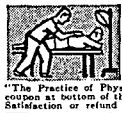

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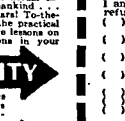

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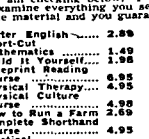

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